

A Demotic Void: Materialism, Capitalism, and Inequality in a Large
Republic

by

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Abstract

This dissertation will address the politics of socioeconomic inequality in the contemporary United States, using a model of politics and nature drawn from ancient Greek atomism, a tradition most often associated with Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. The emerging politics of inequality in the US calls for new ways of conceiving the relationships, or “conventions,” between democracy, capitalism, and nature. These conventions can be rethought together through what I will call “local materialism,” which is a conception of nature and politics that proceeds from a theoretical reconstruction of ancient atomism. In reinterpreting the political theories of the atomists, this project seeks to evoke new ways of convening democratic equality for the present day. I will argue that in order for US democracy to reassemble itself amidst the globally warming capitalisms of the twenty-first century, Americans and others must re-imagine themselves as a new kind of demos, as self-organizing bodies that respond to new actors, events, processes, and circumstances in and around capitalism and nature. Local materialism helps us to do this through the habituation of a certain kind of political affect, a way of moving and feeling in concert with others that creates new powers. These signature political inclinations of the atomists I call “demotic ataraxy.” As a publicly fashioned form of contemplation, perception, and attachment, demotic ataraxy helps to sustain a creative,

disruptive sense of commonality or “harmony.” Local materialism, as a model of nature that involves but is irreducible to human social structures, also yields a distinctly physicalist image of capitalism as a field around which inequalities emerge. Here capitalism, like democracy, is understood not as an abstract or ideal theory applied, however imperfectly, to “actual societies,” but rather as a physical body in itself, a complex and shifting array of things, energies, temporalities, spaces. It is my hope that this materialism will help the many in the US and elsewhere to make better political sense of these unequal times of capitalist expansion and ecological catastrophe.

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Introduction: Inequality, Harmony and the Large Republic

“For in this time of our country’s troubles [*tempore iniquo*] neither can I do my part with untroubled mind” – Lucretius¹

To live in the twenty-first century United States is to live in *tempore iniquo*, “troubled,” “unjust,” or “unequal times.”

This first chapter will introduce the dissertation’s theoretical approach to the politics of inequality in the contemporary United States. Following a 2003 public report from the American Political Science Association, the chapter considers the argument that the rise of inequality in the US is both a cause and a consequence of a “decline” in “political participation.”² This chapter will pursue some of the declines and declinations between political participation and socioeconomic inequality through a discussion of the APSA report, a reconsideration of James Madison’s argument for the “large republic,” and a reconstruction of the idea of political harmony.³ By way of setting up the dissertation’s main line of argument, this chapter will argue that the unequal citizenry of the US should undertake the difficult task of *creating harmony for a large republic* in order to pursue greater equality. Madison’s theory of the large republic was premised upon the impossibility of egalitarian republican harmony and so sought to discourage the pursuit of it through the enlargement of political space. It might therefore seem like the creation of large republican harmony would be neither desirable nor possible. Harmony in a large republic becomes a less unlikely prospect, however, if Madison’s assumptions

¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by WHD Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1975), 53.

² Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol ed., *Inequality and American Democracy*, (New York: Russell Sage 2005).

³ James Madison, “Federalist 10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, edited by Isaac Kramnick. (New York: Penguin Books 1987) 122-128.

about faction, property, political representation, space, human nature, and nature itself, are revised. I will argue that it is important to pursue these revisions given both the glaring failures of Madison's design in the present day and the ambivalent persistence of the representational schemes that the theory inaugurated. Although the large republic does not today allow faction to check faction for the common good, it is not for that reason likely to be abolished or reformed. The spatial arrangements of the large republic are in fact likely to stay with us for some time, in part precisely because they do *not* check faction. Critical public attention to the political premises of the large republic, however, can help to ameliorate its failings and open up new occasions for its transformation. This chapter will focus on the question of harmony, inequality, and large republicanism. The remaining three chapters will pursue the argument that demotic ataraxy is a crucial element of contemporary large republican harmony and to future egalitarian projects in the US. The plan of this introduction is as follows. The chapter begins with a discussion of how one prominent faction of contemporary political science in the US thinks about the problem of rising American inequality. The chapter then goes on to critique and reconstruct Madison's theory of the large republic. The chapter closes with a preview of the rest of the project.

Inequality and Harmony

In 2003 the American Political Science Association appointed a Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, comprised of fifteen political scientists led by Lawrence Jacobs and Theda Skocpol.⁴ The task force was charged with surveying

⁴ Jacobs and Skocpol ed., *Inequality and American Democracy*, ix.

present research into the politics of rising socioeconomic inequality in the US and with charting a course for future research. The results of their work were set forth in 2005 in a report written for both academic and public audiences, *Inequality and American Democracy: What We Know And What We Need to Learn*. The report's two worthy ambitions of synthesizing disparate research literatures on inequality and creating a more publicly engaged political science tend to support one another. The wider implications attending the politics of "inequality" are often missed by both the ideological conventions of left/right partisanship and the institutional habits of disciplinary specialization in the social sciences. To its credit, the Task Force exerted some critical pressure on both of these habits of thought by initiating a healthy round of cross-field dialogue in political science while pursuing a broader dialogue between political science and the public.

The APSA report concludes that despite the gains made by African Americans, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians, and others during the so-called "rights revolutions" of the nineteen sixties and seventies, the United States is becoming a dangerously more unequal society by income and wealth.⁵ The widespread practice of *quid pro quo* vote buying, the report argues, is not empirically supported. However, inequalities of interest representation and "voice" persist in tandem with socioeconomic stratification. The voices of the more economically privileged are heard and responded to more readily by government officials. The more privileged are also more likely to vote, lobby, and formally organize on behalf of their interests. The more privileged are also more likely to join protests and social movements that contend for power outside of normal institutional channels. The less privileged and non-privileged are in turn much more likely to abstain

⁵ Ibid., 1.

or be thwarted from voting, organized interest advocacy, and even more contentious modes of political action. They therefore end up increasingly voiceless in a system of representation that depends upon a very wide range of voices and interests for its legitimation. The disaffection of ever larger numbers of citizens has in turn helped to massively redistribute income and wealth upward to mere fractions of the polity – the top twenty percent, the top five percent, the top one percent, the top half of the top one percent.⁶ The report warns darkly that the reverberations between civic disaffection and socioeconomic stratification are likely to grow in coming decades. The great factious cacophony of liberal pluralist interest competition, the driving animus of US democratic governance, will be increasingly dampened, deflected, and circumscribed.⁷

The Task Force nonetheless wagers on the continued vitality of representative government in the United States. Although voice, wealth, and power have concentrated dramatically among elite and more privileged strata, the report offers good reasons to think that the full-blown consolidation of oligarchy is unlikely to emerge in the near term. These include the enduring partisan dynamics of party competition, the continued sensitivity of elected officials to shifts in public opinion and the composition of the electorate, the persistent disunity of elites themselves on crucial economic and political issues, and the abiding beliefs of the public in various versions of the democratic creed.⁸ These are contestable but plausible wagers to make on the future prospects for US democracy. To make these bets is to critically engage a particular image of the US polity, one that resembles less a rising oligarchy than a frayed, dissolute, shrunken popular sovereignty, threatened more by the bottoming out of majority apathy than by the

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁸ Ibid., 12.

intrigues of the one percent at the very top. On this view the report's prescription for diminishing inequality through broader citizen participation makes a great deal of sense. The most likely pathway to greater equality in the US would rest with the revival and reconstruction of pluralist democracy rather than with its whole replacement by some other model of governance. In order for US democracy to interrupt the present trajectories of stratification, the report argues, its politics must attract larger pluralities and new majorities.⁹ These new voices and interests would need to continuously connect with many who otherwise might quite reasonably disdain the ambiguities and risks of pluralist politics. Moreover, these new movements would have to emerge during an historical moment when these ambiguities and risks are in crucial respects more forbidding than before, when political defeats for the many are a palpable fact of life, with a momentum all their own. The report acknowledges that reversing this momentum will not come easily, but the prospects are supported to a considerable degree by two unstated premises that are central to its analysis. First, the current configuration of socioeconomic inequality is neither politically inevitable nor stable. Far from a static neoliberal straightjacket, the present trajectory of socioeconomic stratification travels upon shifting political terrain; it is an open-ended negotiation among a still diverse range of actors, interests, ideas, institutions, and ideologies. Opportunities and pressures for broader political movements therefore still persist. Second, government remains a powerful force itself in modulating inequality, for better and for worse, through fiscal and regulatory policies as well as more directly through redistributive social policies. Because the US state is unlikely to be permanently or completely captured by any given party,

⁹ Ibid., 12.

class, interest, or “faction,” the precise contours of its enormous gravitational pull on socioeconomic stratification remains an open political question. These classic tenets of pluralist theory too are plausible but contestable wagers about inequality and American democracy, and the Task Force argues persuasively that they are both well worth making.

The Task Force is more ambivalent on the normative question of *what should count* as political equality and why. It does not propose an ideal political economy or even an ideal distribution of income. In its survey of inequality literature, the report gives only brief mention to (unnamed) “normative theorists” of distributive justice. The report rightly notes that few such theorists advocate a perfectly equal distribution of resources and that many instead undertake to justify relative degrees of “tolerable” or legitimate inequality.¹⁰ In this same vein the report also acknowledges worries by other theorists about conflicts between equality and individual liberty and between equality and economic efficiency, innovation, and growth.¹¹ Rather than pursue these questions, the report instead aligns itself with public opinion in support of two other conceptions of equality: “equal opportunity” and “equal political representation.” The report cites public opinion surveys that show that the US citizenry is concerned that many ordinary people lack a fair shot at getting ahead and that government is unresponsive to the concerns of the ordinary people generally. The Task Force “takes its cue” from “the citizens themselves” in endorsing these two formulations of equality as its own normative standard.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 7-8.

The report's reliance on public opinion as its own normative cue is puzzling. Although equal opportunity and equal representation are important democratic principles that are also likely in some form or other to be widely acclaimed by Americans, both concepts can be understood in multiple and radically conflicting ways. The radically contested character of these ideas has in fact long been evident at the many intersections between socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequalities, where, for example, what counts as equality of opportunity is itself the ideological ground upon which inequalities are constituted and challenged (e.g. in debates over education funding and affirmative action.) Given the United States' historical experiences of race, class, and sex, which both precede and continue to shape the present politics of socioeconomic stratification, it is naïve to imagine Americans as egalitarians in any simple or even cohering sense, whatever the responses given to pollsters about "equal rights." The Task Force's invocation of "public support" for these ideas as the principal reason for making them its own normative standard rings false, especially in light of the report's own dire prognoses of civic erosion and the privileging of elite voices and interests. In a polity ravaged by emerging and archaic inequalities, the meanings of these concepts will surely become even more intensely contested. To render "the public" or "the citizenry" as an authoritative univocal body under these circumstances, one capable of offering a clear "cue," is implausible enough, let alone a body bound together by shared beliefs in equal opportunity and equal representation.

Later, in the report's conclusion, the Task Force acknowledges some of these difficulties while reconsidering the relationship between public opinion and ideology.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 219.

The report questions the classical assumption that citizens form their beliefs autonomously as “first movers,” free of ideological manipulation, so that their actual preferences can be taken to be the authentic expressions of their genuine interests, beliefs, or desires, rather than the echo of someone else’s propaganda.¹⁴ This assumption will have to undergo reconsideration, the report argues, because elite actors are now likely to exercise an increasingly privileged relationship to the media, to policy research, and to other ideological apparatuses.¹⁵ Here the Task Force seems to have forgotten its own invocation of public opinion as the primary authority on what counts as equality. Could not a steadfast belief in the ideal of “equal opportunity” itself be an ideological effect of some sort? If so, then perhaps some other theory of equality might serve political science better, even a new, unknown, or unpopular one. The report also, however, points toward an important difficulty in contemporary democratic theory more broadly: the relationship of ideology to political legitimacy, including legitimization crises born of socioeconomic stratification. If citizens are not quite first movers, neither are they likely to be entirely or permanently captured by ideological manipulation. The report wisely suggests that theorizing the emerging politics of inequality will require a careful attention to emerging forms of ideological domination as well as a kind of theoretical humility and respect toward the expressed interests, desires, beliefs, and actions of the actual people with whom political science attempts to share a polity. It is important to do both of these things simultaneously, even if doing so profoundly complicates the question of identifying democratic legitimization and those forms of inequality that violate it.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Task Force might have pursued many different theoretical approaches to the normative question of political equality. One line of thinking mentioned all too briefly in the report stands out in particular. The report closes its brief review of conventional distributive justice positions with two rhetorical questions that resonate more powerfully with its findings. It approvingly cites theorists who “are concerned whenever the life chances of citizens in a democracy become too divergent.”¹⁶ The report goes on to ask, provocatively, when “disparities become too great, how can people retain a sense of community and shared fate and engage in informed decision-making? And how can political equality be realized when citizens have increasingly divergent resources?”¹⁷ The Task Force unfortunately leaves these questions unexplored, but they haunt the report’s analyses and conclusions.

These are important questions to pose and pursue together in an increasingly, multiply unequal United States. These linkages between civic knowledge, participation, and citizens’ own lived sense of common fate also link up with the Task Force’s image of an ever dividing polity: where some forms of inequality have diminished while others have surged, where political and socioeconomic stratifications ambiguously fuel one another without collapsing inexorably into a single trajectory, where *what counts as equality and legitimacy remains fundamentally contested*, and where new political mobilizations emerge, flow, and fade away unpredictably at multiple, shifting spaces and speeds throughout the society. It is unlikely that such a sense of community, shared fate, citizen knowledge, and converging life chances prevails even now among the US citizenry, but such a sense might perhaps be *creatively initiated and sustained*, more

¹⁶ Ibid., 7

¹⁷ Ibid.

prospectively than defensively. One (ancient Greek) name for this common political sense that combines practical citizen knowledge with a shared feeling of jeopardy and possibility among would-be equals in a community is *homonoia*, “like-mindedness” or “harmony.”¹⁸ Harmony can be understood as a common affective disposition toward political action that is capable of both preserving old equalities and creating new ones during moments of extraordinary political ambiguity or danger. The concept’s antithesis is *stasis*, or faction, which makes it distinctly pertinent to the present state of disrepair afflicting the US system of Madisonian pluralism.

The Task Force closes its report by calling for “a new generation of research devoted to critical studies of democratic life.”¹⁹ This new wave of research would attend to the lived experiences of both inequality and political action in and around the institutional and ideological environs of US pluralism. The report argues that the larger task of such research is to pursue, in Pendleton Herring’s words, “ ‘the vital function of helping our democracy to know itself better.’ ”²⁰ The report also argues that the pursuit of such work in an era of rising inequality requires both multi-disciplinary research and new circuits between academic social science and a conflicted, ambiguously constituted polity. Here again, in its aspirations for the future of political science and in its hopes for closer contact between political science and the public, the report appeals to something very much like the ancient idea of harmony, where elements of common experience, a felt sense of shared fate, and a broadened horizon for civic self-knowledge are creatively reassembled during a protracted moment of division and uncertainty.

¹⁸ For ancient Greek conceptions of harmony, see Paul Woodruff, *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea*, (London: Oxford University Press 2005), 81-108.

¹⁹ Jacobs and Skocpol ed. *Inequality and American Democracy* 231.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

This dissertation, completed almost ten years after APSA published its report, can be read as one of the “critical studies of democratic life” that the Task Force had hoped to provoke. This project might also be understood as a dissent from the Task Force’s original findings, albeit one with the advantage of some hindsight. In many ways the 2003 APSA report has proven quite prescient. The voids of socioeconomic inequality persist in the United States. Inequality - or rather the somewhat more circumscribed categories of “wealth inequality” and “income inequality” - has emerged as a frequent topic of public debate, although predominantly among left/progressive partisans, pundits, and academics. The partisan and elite circulation of inequality rhetoric, an ideological parochialism that is almost inseparable from what E.E. Schattschneider might have called its “upper class accent,” is unfortunately consistent with the report’s findings.²¹ Even so, and just as the Task Force had hoped, the new debate on inequality has focused new scrutiny on the top “one percent” of wealthy individuals and households, this in large part thanks to the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, which itself was organized in response to the Great Recession of 2008. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008, spurred by both the Great Recession and the aftermaths of the Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina, also signaled an important shift in key parts of the electorate toward a more egalitarian progressivism. Yet inequality and inequalities, of the socioeconomic variety alongside many others, continue to contravene democratic life in the contemporary United States, a fact that is likely to outlast the current prominence of “inequality” as a trendy research program or progressive rallying cry. Future critical

²¹ See E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, (Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace 1975) 35.

studies of democratic life in the US will probably have to negotiate such ideological ebbs and flows with a gadfly's sense of untimely persistence.

This project shares many of the fears, commitments, and wagers of the APSA Task Force. Inequality is an urgent problem for the United States and for contemporary political science. The violence wrought by inequality in the present day life of the United States is enormous, and the dangers that it poses to the future are incalculably grave. This project takes as its premise the report's conclusion that the United States faces a long-term legitimization crisis driven by new processes of stratification, one that is also in complex ways bound up with "declines" in political participation. It also concurs with the report's contention that broader participation in elections, political parties, interest groups, unions, and social movements are necessary elements of any viable egalitarian politics. The dissertation also shares the Task Force's judgment that, despite rising inequalities, oligarchy is unlikely to emerge in the near time and that government will continue to remain a vital if ambivalent force in either exacerbating or ameliorating inequality. This project also follows the Task Force in attending to the emerging *politics* of inequality. It will therefore not address itself exclusively or even primarily to the *ethical or normative* questions of *what should ultimately count* as equality, distributive justice, or political legitimacy. Although these are important questions, this project does not take a position on them. It instead approaches the question of inequality prudentially, in order to better understand how egalitarian projects of many different normative varieties might be initiated and sustained through new forms of political action, organization, collective meaning and attachment, and power. Another name for this cluster of prudential concerns is harmony.

The dissertation's focus on the idea of political harmony in part also reflects a deep agnosticism toward the foundational questions of legitimacy and equality and their relationship to what claims to be popular sovereignty in the United States. The Task Force report understands US democracy as a constitutionally secured popular sovereignty that depends upon a certain level of participation for its ongoing legitimation by citizens. Although this sovereignty is eroding because of a complex interaction between civic withdrawal and socioeconomic stratification, the report assumes that increased citizen participation will suffice to restore legitimation to what it once was or to what it needs to be, this while diminishing inequality along way. While sympathetic to that legitimatist view of US constitutional order, this project remains less than entirely persuaded of it. The idea of harmony, as a creative sense of commonality in civic action, self-knowledge, and fate, is advanced here as a supporting element to democratic legitimacy, participation, and equality, however these latter ideas are understood. Harmony on this conception helps egalitarians of many different stripes to intervene in the emerging politics of inequality in the United States, whether or not the United States is now (or ever really was) a legitimate popular sovereignty constituted by equals. Because of its power to sustain, defend, or create political action, harmony is useful to democratic projects in and around many different sites and moments of legitimation. Harmony can help strong democracies hang tough against emerging threats from within and without, but it is also helps weak or unconsolidated democracies hold sway over longstanding rival powers. Harmony is a powerful source of solidarity for democratic insurgents struggling against non- or pseudo-democracies, but it also serves democrats during more ambiguous moments, where what counts as "democratic" remains opaque, contradictory,

or impossibly remote. Harmony opens new spaces for those cosmopolitan democrats, for example, who try to inhabit and shift the aporias of liberal sovereignty, a project that Jacques Derrida has called “the democracy to come,” in contested zones of hospitality, refuge, or during moments of radical forgiveness between enemies.²² Crucial to harmony’s usefulness to democrats is its ability to reveal new possibilities for “participation,” where participation is not understood as only the enactment of popular sovereignty or its legitimation, but also as a protean capacity for generating voice, action, and power with others, which may emerge before, after, or during legitimation (including its conflicts, crises, ambiguities, and aporias.) This also means that harmony can help democrats to both create new equalities and preserve and reconcile existing ones into new forms of democratic life.

This dissertation also shares the Task Force’s hopes for a broader interdisciplinary dialogue on inequality and a closer relationship between political science and the public. The urgency of inequality as a public problem demands new scholarly conventions within and outside political science, the academy, and “the public,” however defined. Such conventions, as revised habits of critical reflection and empirical sensibility, must be able to sustain political attachments to a citizenry that is not bound together by clear egalitarian norms and therefore offers no bright cues as to how it might respond to critique. New public scholarly circuits must in turn also reckon with novel forms of ideological subjection, not only in response to the electoral and commercial propaganda authored by politicians, parties, and interest groups but also in response to the more far-reaching and impersonal ideologies of advanced communication

²² Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, (New York: Routledge 2001) 84.

technologies, modern states and bureaucracies, mass publics and national cultures, and capitalism. Because US citizens are neither homespun egalitarians, nor pristinely sovereign “first movers,” nor perfect echoes of some hidden ideological chorus, the vital task of helping the polity to know itself better will depend upon a political science that reliably unsettles all three of these conceits and others too. A more self-aware polity would involve, then, among other things, new critical conventions that subsist somewhere in-between the acid baths of ideology-critique and the frictions of democratic involvement.

This project searches after such conventions by reconsidering the ancient Greek pairing of *nomos* and *physis*, “convention” and “nature.” One reason to revive these paired terms is to evoke some of the productive tensions and ambivalences surrounding the ancients’ debates over political equality. Are citizens equal by virtue of their natural endowments or by virtue of “conventions” like law and culture? If the answer is somehow “both,” then how might the troublesome stuff of human nature - and nonhuman nature – drive or delimit conventional equalities? And how might the natural equalities inherent to human beings be affirmed and defended by the unequal vagaries of political action? These are old questions that this project will attempt to recast in a twenty first century light. There is, however, a much larger motivation behind putting this pairing to work here. This dissertation hopes to “bring nature back in” as an element of human political life, a creative social force in itself that is crucial to the realization of egalitarian projects. Because it is so much more powerful and active than human conventions, nature cannot be adequately understood as only a stable background condition to human values, an inert structural constraint upon human projects, or as the lawful teleology of the

human good life. Human conventions are entirely a part of nature too, but only a part, as nature in itself exceeds the power of human practices to control, modify, or interpret it. The natural character of human political conventions, and the abundant capacity of nature of resist, exceed, create, and destroy those conventions, are unsettling facts of political life that the atomists knew well and that present day egalitarians might do well to reconsider. In an era of global warming and globalizing capitalism, critics of democratic life ignore these unsettling facts about politics at their peril.

The APSA report courts precisely this peril by overlooking the question of environmental politics entirely, especially climate change. Despite the Task Force's declared aim of setting a broad research agenda for future work on inequality in the United States, global warming is not even mentioned in the report. It is unlikely that the Task Force members were unaware of climate change or that they doubted the scientific consensus on the issue that was already well established by 2003. Rather, it is more likely that the Task Force *simply did not imagine* that there might be pressing connections between the social processes driving inequality in the United States and those involved in global warming. In 2005 and 2012 many of those connections erupted into public visibility in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. Both storms had massive economic and political impacts as well as environmental ones. The possibility that both of these "natural" catastrophes might very well have been the products of human-caused climate change is by now a commonplace view among scientists and the public in the United States. This commonplace view is still less than a public consensus. Global warming is also an ideologically charged topic of partisan contestation, as well as a powerful source of fatalism, despair, and public withdrawal for many people. It would be

a mistake to assume, as classical liberal pluralism might, that partisanship and quietism toward global warming are always counter-posed, let alone that they correct or cancel one another in a salutary way. The hyper-partisanship of the climate denialists and the passive resignation of the knowing but disengaged, for example, often work together to make political action on the environment more intractable. The report's neglect to think through the connections between global warming, the "decline" of political participation, and the future of inequality represents a startling failure of critical imagination, judgment, even empirical sense.

A similar and related failure is at work in the report's treatment of capitalism. The Task Force gives only passing mention to capitalism in its analysis of inequality. When capitalism does come up, the report tends to regard it as either a harmless feature of the American creed or as a stable, prosperous system that is unlikely to be itself an enduring source of crisis and inequality. The report points out that US inequality has waxed and waned under different periods, all of which have occurred under capitalism, and that political movements and government action have helped to diminish inequality throughout. To make "capitalism" one of the prime culprits for rising inequality in the present period, then, might seem to be historically arbitrary and politically unhelpful. The report's generally placid attitude toward capitalism also likely reflects the Task Force's desire to connect with an American public that takes capitalism's virtues to be a national article of faith. Yet in the troubled wake of the Great Recession of 2008, these assumptions about capitalism's inherent stability and political neutrality are now more controversial. The present day debate over inequality has made the workings and normativities of capitalism a matter of intensified partisan concern. Capitalism is now

often seen less as a commonplace, incontrovertible national creed than a visibly troubled array of policies, institutions, values, and interests, one that demands energetic new scrutiny and intervention. This is true of the Tea Party, for whom cultural, racial, and governmental threats to capitalism are threats to freedom itself, as it is of Occupy Wall Street, for whom capitalism is itself a threat to freedom. Although socialism is not a part of this debate, the relationship between capitalism and democracy in the broadest terms is very much at stake. The Task Force should have had a better *prospective sense* for at least some of these possibilities. If the precise timing, causes, and consequences of the Great Recession were unforeseeable to political science in 2005, the real possibility of sudden systemic capitalist crisis was not. Neither should the Task Force have been so quick to discount capitalism's power to discourage, co-opt, and deflect political participation, even and perhaps especially during "normal" times. The Task Force's tendency to make capitalism out to be something that is all-American, stable, and ultimately fair, looks today less like prudent rhetoric and subtle historical analysis and more like an anxious, ahistorical form of bad faith, one moreover that is often at odds with common experience.

In its departure from the Task Force, then, this project takes capitalism and climate change to be urgent topics for future critical studies of democratic life in the United States. Both capitalism and climate change are in themselves and in combination with one another massive forces that disrupt and threaten egalitarian projects in the US and globally. In a long period of rising stratification and civic withdrawal, these pressures are multiplied many times over. Yet capitalism and climate change are not simply *causes* of inequality; they are also, again both separately and together, *conditions* for any conceivable egalitarian politics in the US in the here and now. Just as there is no realistic

possibility of first transcending capitalism and then recreating equality in the US on the basis of socialism in the near term, neither can we seriously imagine that climate change will be reversed as a precondition for some subsequent civic renaissance. Rather, egalitarians must somehow reckon and negotiate with both of these forces concurrently, on the run. These negotiations will be complicated further by the fact that both capitalism and climate change are complex and variable phenomena that often involve stochastic events and processes. These “swerves” (the California tech boom and the California droughts, for example) tend to resist reliable forecasting, let alone regulation. The difficulties multiply when these swerves involve both capitalism and climate change simultaneously (as in the globalization of fracking, for example, and its involvement with water tables and earthquakes).

These disquieting simultaneities make for troubled times. The emergence of capitalism preceded the present dynamics of US stratification by over a century or so and global warming will menace US politics for generations to come, whether socioeconomic inequality rises or falls. Another way to put this project’s dissent from the Task Force, then, is that it situates the present day politics of inequality, ambiguously, in-between two large and complex causes of inequality, one past and one future. These causes inter- involve a capitalist past that, as Marx says, weighs nightmarishly upon the living and an ecologically catastrophic future that has already arrived, a palpably present futurity that accelerates the anthropocene’s crises by encouraging withdrawal, denial, and other self- fulfilling forms of fatalism.²³ This project’s principal criticism of the Task Force report is that it takes too many present-past and present-future causes of inequality off the table,

²³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, translated by C.P. Dutt. (New York: International Publishers 1967) 15.

and so ends up participating in them even as it undertakes to set a “middle range” agenda for their amelioration. By contrast, this dissertation will try to offer a more supple, open, and troubled conception of political time, in order to better think through some of the swerves and voids in US democracy’s “middle range.”

The Task Force report does a better job of thinking about another set of causes and conditions of US inequality, one that is related to capitalism and ecology but that is also distinct from them: the theory of liberal pluralism that is embodied in the US constitutional design. Even here, however, the report should have gone much further. In the next section, I will briefly explore Madisonian pluralism’s conception of “the large republic.”²⁴ I will argue that the large republic, like capitalism and climate change, is at once a cause of inequality and condition of egalitarianism in the United States and that *large republican harmony* is a vital element for egalitarian projects of many different varieties. I will then conclude this chapter with an explanation of the rest of the project.

Large Republican Harmony

The Task Force report wants more socioeconomic equality in the United States, and hopes to achieve it through the expansion of citizen participation at all levels of government, including voting, interest group advocacy, broadened and intensified party competition, and the contentious politics of social movements. The Task Force also wants tighter regulation of campaign financing, more governmental regulation of large corporations generally, and more universalistic social policies that are likely to command

²⁴ Madison “Federalist 10” 126

majoritarian support inter-generationally, on the model of Social Security and Medicare.²⁵ In the thick of all of these things, the Task Force also wants to support a stronger sense of commonality and self-knowledge among the citizenry too, “harmony.” The Task Force’s egalitarianism is, programmatically, a neo-progressive pluralism, one that aims to ameliorate socioeconomic inequalities through government action, supported by many broad coalitions of citizens and groups, all pursued within the contours of a more regulated capitalism and the present constitutional order. Other egalitarianisms are imaginable as responses to US inequality- corporatist, radical democratic, libertarian, socialist. Unlike these other egalitarianisms, which tend to be imports of loosely European provenance, the Task Force’s progressive egalitarianism addresses itself directly to some of the institutional dynamics that are specific to US politics, especially those involving interest groups, public opinion, the two parties, the electoral system more generally, and the shared and divided powers, constituencies, and administrative apparatuses of US federalism.

The Task Force argues persuasively that progressive egalitarians face formidable systemic obstacles in the United States. The report is long on summary analyses of these obstacles and short on prescriptions for resisting and overcoming them. Among the most daunting of these obstacles is the Madisonian design of US federalism.²⁶ Madisonian federalism aims to thwart rather than encourage popular pressures upon lawmakers, especially on “broad” issues that involve large and anxious majorities like socioeconomic inequality. The report takes Madisonianism to be a permanent if problematic feature of political order in the United States, and hopes that egalitarians will be able to work

²⁵ Jacobs and Skocpol ed., *Inequality and American Democracy*, 186-190.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30, 88.

through and around its counter-populist machinery, as they did during the Progressive Era and the New Deal.²⁷

This premise makes good political and historical sense, but it perhaps also makes sense to reconsider Madisonianism itself as a living theory, to critically re-inhabit its perspective in order to reimagine its possible trajectories. For Madison's large republic is not what it used to be, and it has more than one possible future. In this section I will draw upon Madison's Federalist Paper 10 in order to reimagine the prospects for egalitarian harmony under the present constitutional order. I will argue that even though Madisonian republicanism is at least as bad for egalitarianism as the Task Force imagines, it nonetheless contains within itself elements for another, more egalitarian, "harmonious" pluralism. I will try here to rearrange some of these elements in order to revise and swerve the Madisonian imaginary into another direction, what I will call "large republican harmony." The rest of this project will argue that the ancient atomists' conception of demotic ataraxy is a kind of large republican harmony, one that might be useful for contemporary egalitarianisms of many different stripes, including the progressive pluralist vision advanced by the Task Force.

The report does not think that the United States is under the sway of an emerging oligarchy, a soon-to-be consolidated rule by the few, but it worries about those who are empowered by civic withdrawal and socioeconomic stratification, in particular their incentives for sustaining stratification through inertia.

[T]he most persistent impact of stratified political participation is to reinforce the bias of the American political process toward 'deadlock and delay' – as the framers of the US constitution and James Madison intended [...] The recent growth in economic inequality appears to be increasing the power of individuals and groups who have a stake

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

in doing little or nothing about substantially counteracting disparities based on income and wealth.²⁸

The report argues that Madison's federal design is also a culprit here, in that it keeps the inertial elites too insulated from the dynamic pressures of popular mobilization. Inertia of this sort has a long association with political thinking about harmony and its opposite, strife or faction. The Greek word for factional strife is *stasis*, derived etymologically from "standing still."²⁹ Although factionalism is certainly dynamic in its way, it lacks the distinctive creativity of harmony, with its felt commonalities of action, jeopardy, and fate. Factionalism, on this ancient view, keeps polities from evolving, from re-inventing themselves amidst the emergent pressures of the new, and so kills polities through a paralysis that looks very much like partisan hyperactivity.

Madison might not have recognized his own theory in the report's rendition of it, or in the way that it is lived out in twenty first century American politics. Madison's republicanism made *stasis* itself the remedy to *stasis* on the assumption that democratic harmony is just a fever dream. Madison also had a certain faith in the creative energies of faction. The alien spectacle of an apathetically unequal republic, jeopardized by inequality precisely because its citizens fail to factionalize, might very well have unnerved him. The report's findings show, among other things, that Madison's republican machinery has tumbled into the twenty first century jammed, twisted, inverted. The model's disrepair also throws into question some of Madison's thinking about what kinds of creatures human beings are, and how they think and feel their way through the territorialities of democratic life and the wider Earth.

²⁸ Ibid., 88.

²⁹ See Woodruff, *First Democracy*, 118.

In Federalist 10 Madison argues that larger rather than smaller republics are the solution to factionalism, the scourge of ancient popular governments in Athens and Rome.³⁰ Factions are not just any powerful or unruly groups, and neither are they synonymous with the lower classes. Factions for Madison are more precisely understood as groups of citizens, “whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”³¹ More than mere public nuisances or vaguely suspect “special interests,” factions violate the common good.³² Factions are a routine feature of democratic life because they are “sown” into the nature of human beings, making popular government an inherently delicate undertaking. Factions are driven psychologically by hard limits to human reason, which differ by degree in individuals and which conspire with narcissism to produce everyday fanaticism. Human beings’ unequal capacities for economic activity are a part of this story as well, what Madison calls our inherently “unequal faculties of acquiring property.”³³ Madison argues that “the rage” “for an equal division of property” is “a wicked project” precisely because it attempts to render equal those human faculties that can only ever be “diverse.”³⁴ Factions, deranged, furious, and self-regarding, stir up this sort of rage all the time, along with rages for “paper money” and “the abolition of debt.”³⁵

³⁰ Madison, “Federalist 10,” 122-123.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 123.

³³ Ibid., 124.

³⁴ Ibid., 123-124.

³⁵ Ibid., 128.

Madison describes factions in vitalistic, elemental language, the better to emphasize their ferociously self-generating power. Factions are “fire,” “disease,” “turbulence,” also organs and limbs.³⁶ There is a palpably charged visceralism in Madison’s images of factional life. Even in those doomed democracies and small republics, there is electricity between the threats that factions pose to justice and the constructive energies that free factious faculties set loose in the world. These creative currents run through liberty itself, drawing upon deep sources in human psychology and human beings’ economic involvement with nonhuman nature, all of which helps to make Madison’s perverse remedy to *stasis* more palatable.

For Madison, the solution to faction is not, as the ancients thought, harmony, or what he reductively calls “giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests,” but faction set against itself.³⁷ Madison argues that eliminating the causes of faction through the cultivation of likeness is naïve and likely illiberal. Better to control the effects of faction instead through a strong central government with relatively fewer representatives and an expanded political territory, “the large republic.”

Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests: you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens, or if such motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other.³⁸

Minority factions get even weaker under the large republic while majority factions are dissipated and numbed, senseless to their own power. The larger the territorial constituency, the harder it is to capture representatives and undermine the common good. This all depends, crucially, on factionalism persisting as a routine

³⁶ Ibid., 123, 128.

³⁷ Ibid., 126.

³⁸ Ibid., 127.

inclination for most citizens. If not enough people factionalize, or only factionalize too passively, privately, or remotely, off and away and unnoticed by the representatives, the large republic can be easily captured by those factions that *do* mobilize, leaving everyone else “vex and oppress[ed].”³⁹

When Madisonian factions check factions for the common good, “the permanent and aggregate interests” of the polity are produced via an emergentist mechanics. The dynamics of faction competition flow, swerve, and snake through the enlarged territory. Here factions have room to maneuver and collide, pushing, pulling, combining, dissipating, their civic vices more or less canceling each other out. In transferring their ballistic energies, factions produce surprising new arrangements of power, and this keeps any one faction from dominating for too long. The very scarcity of the representatives, and the fact that they deliberate far away, makes them difficult to capture. If they get bought, they do not stay bought, for if they become too factious themselves, they court the ire of some critical mass of their large constituency or their colleagues in the legislature, who have to contend with large constituencies of their own. If faction dynamics stay at the boiling point, incited by the tumult of the large republic’s greater range, where no partiality can prevail for long, then a sort of emergent impartiality tends to prevail in the small far away legislature by default. In the Madisonian large republic, the common good is therefore sustained through a kind of Brownian motion, a vector that is reliably propelled by the interaction of other vectors in a roomy, turbulent space.

Madison’s large republic, then, is also a way of imagining territoriality. “Large” here refers to numbers of people, but also to *the geographical extent and variety* of

³⁹ Ibid., 127.

physical, nonhuman space. A crowded industrial city that is dominated by the steel industry, say, like nineteenth century Pittsburgh, could never be a large republic, even assuming a growing “diverse” human population. This is in part because there would be too much uniform stability of economic faculties and interests, but also because the industrialized territory would be too orderly and circumscribed to receive the outside energies of travelers, newcomers, or anyone else with disruptive connections to other spaces, places, and flows. Rather than a large republic, the outcome would more likely be a company town, perhaps one dominated by a family like the Carnegies. Enlarged territories support a demotic element in Madison’s scheme, in that they bring in a more diverse range of actors, voices, interests, and energies, produced in part by the variety of human faculties and their varying involvements with nature too.

Madison’s conception of territoriality seeks an epistemic and ethical balance between the national and the local, but like his theory of human nature, his territoriality is inflected toward the vision and empowerment of national elites. Local politics are for small, ordinary affairs. They are particularistic, attentive to routine things that, while important, are unlikely to be of grand historical significance. The national government in turn is unlikely to be sensitive to these small things, because it is drawn to an elevated, “refine[d] and enlarge[d]” view of historical time and space.⁴⁰ Only the national representatives, who have been propelled into world-historical objectivity through factious Brownian motion, can sense the republic’s true situation in human affairs.

Madison’s large republic, then, exercises ethical, epistemic, as well as political monopolies over its territory. These monopolies entail not just the legitimate use of force

⁴⁰ Ibid., 126.

over a “given” territory, as Max Weber imagines, but claim prerogative over the highest-order scales of territorialization.⁴¹ The large republic has to be the “largest” territorializing power around, the greatest aggregator and arranger of interests and passions, rather than just a legitimate violence monopoly. Were other powers, potential factions, to emerge and aggregate interests and passions *on the same large scale* as the republic, the large republic would then be *too small* to divide and conquer them. Similar dangers would emerge if rival powers were to think and feel at the same world-historical scale as the national legislature, for the prudent large republic has no need for *other* enlarged and refined public views. The Brownian motion that drives the republic’s civic virtue could in either case find itself attracted by other gravities, and might well merge into some other kind of extra-republican dynamic. Madison assumes that large economic interests like agriculture, manufacture, and banking will always and only form “distinct interests,” and so they will never combine cohesively for good or for ill. Because the vagaries of human nature and geography will always be sufficiently diverse to keep interstate commerce from capturing national politics, the large republic has no need to fear home grown rival territorializers. If such powers were to evolve, however, perhaps taking the form of transnational corporations, or fiscal and monetary dependence upon a global market, or the foreign entanglements of a global military empire, or a borderless ecological catastrophe caused by certain kinds of mass consumption, then the republic’s monopoly on large scale territorialization would face troubled times.

In reckoning the origins of contemporary inequality in the United States, it might be tempting, after reading Federalist 10, to give inordinate weight to the Madisonian

⁴¹ See Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (London: Oxford University Press) 71.

imaginary at the expense of more proximate causes, such as globalization, wage erosion, austerity-driven shifts in fiscal and monetary policy (especially regressive taxation), intensified business mobilizations, elite-driven campaign financing, and a generation of welfare state retrenchment, among others. The Madisonian design does, however, militate against what the Task Force proposes to counter these more proximate causes: coordinated federal and state action to redistribute wealth, in concert with the sustained mobilization of broader pluralities and majorities of citizens, unified by common interests and conscious of their power. The large republic imaginary embodies Madison's fear of egalitarianism and popular mobilizations. He feared these things because he feared his fellow citizens as human beings. His fear extended to the propertied too, although he feared the propertyless much more. Neo-progressive egalitarians, even those who are already mindful of Madisonianism's institutional legacies, might also contemplate Madison's existential legacies, especially his dread of human nature, and how these persist in the present day of public life of the US, institutionally, factiously.

It is also important to think seriously about the fact that the large republic does not work, at least not in the way that Madison imagined. As the Task Force report argues, the republic is routinely captured, and governed, by organized elite factions. Factions from below do not check factions from above, and elite factions are marvelously well coordinated amongst themselves, even if they also have their own disagreements and divisions. (There is of course much upon which they do agree.) The mystery, put in Madisonian terms, is why this factiousness does not result in full-blown oligarchy or civil war. Part of the answer to that mystery would involve the impersonal character of capitalist, bureaucratic, and disciplinary forms of power, especially those that produce

“democratic” “legitimation” in the United States. Part of the answer would also involve a certain persistent formlessness that currently attends US governmental power, something ambivalently in-between or perhaps globalized beyond the classical forms of oligarchy and democracy, orbiting an open historical space or critical juncture that remains for now underdetermined.

If the United States government is neither the seamless embodiment of the common good nor only the plaything of oligarchy or impersonal forces, neither is it, for all of its normative ambiguities, itself inert or powerless. The Task Force rightly wagers on the continued vitality of the USG, including its power to intervene in socioeconomic structures and create new kinds of political meaning, elite inertial drags notwithstanding. This, in turn, is in part because the apparatuses, codes, and imaginaries of US federalism persist as massive forces in their own right. The large republican imaginary is one distinctly recognizable element among others here, most prominently in and around the evolving powers of the Presidency and the Congress. The large republic is hardly the anti-faction machine that Madison promised, but it nonetheless continues to attract and arrange passions, impulses, ideologies, and interests through complex apparatuses of capture. The republic’s jealous federal power continues to re-code and reconfigure its vast territory too, albeit uneasily amidst large rival forces like corporations, capitalism generally, and now climate change. Much like climate change and capitalism, the large republic is both a living cause of inequality and a condition of egalitarianism in the United States. Constitutional amendments devolving the federal power to small republics are about as likely as socialism and ecological sustainability in the current era. Neo-

progressives and other egalitarians might profit, then, by critically reimagining Madison's imaginary, in order to redirect its dynamics and trajectories.

If such a reimagining of the large republic for the present day sounds far fetched, recall that Madison's republicanism radically revised a variety of ideas, some of them quite ancient, that were in circulation during the American founding, including ancient Greek democratic thought, Aristotle's eudaimonism, Rousseau's general will, Locke's theory of property, and the small republicanism of the anti-Federalists, the latter rooted in longstanding pre-revolutionary understandings of liberty. Madison's federalism recycles these concepts and traditions with a provocative series of theoretical inversions. Small republics become large ones, civic virtues and harmonies become serendipitous factional stalemates, and local popular assemblies become small, far away national legislatures. Madison's theoretical inversions were hurriedly improvised in order to intervene in the public debate over ratification, and then afterwards they began a long and complicated career of their own. Denizens of a twenty first century large republic - one that is much larger than Madison could have imagined and jeopardized by an unequal civic withdrawal that violates his deepest assumptions about human life - might try to recycle elements of Madison's theory in the same spirit of urgency and improvisation, re-inverting some of his inversions along the way.

This project will pursue a number of these inversions through a theory of "large republican harmony." The Task Force's progressive egalitarianism, with its interests in stronger harmony amongst the citizenry, is already a kind of inversion of Madisonianism. Their vision of a more participatory democracy convened around sustained egalitarian redistributionism pushes the large republic into a much different political space.

Strengthening citizens' sense of common fate might also require a more generous conception of human nature and human beings' place in nature too. Human political animals might be better than Madison imagines them to be, less factious because less greedy, less vain, less relentlessly fanatical. There are perhaps as well other ways of thinking about nature as thing in itself that might better support a more generous conception of human beings' place within it. Progressive egalitarians might reconsider too the limits and possibilities of human self-knowledge and how these limits play out democratically and economically. In doing so, the role of creativity in democratic life that Madison perversely ascribes to the Brownian motion of faction could be recast, redistributed, re-territorialized. If we provisionally assume that demotic harmonies are sometimes capable of creativity too, then the jealous territorial prerogatives claimed by national government would no longer seem so necessary. The refined and enlarged view that Madison ascribes mechanistically to the emergent ideologies of the representatives might emerge elsewhere and otherwise among the many, locally, regionally, transnationally.

It would be a mistake to think that egalitarian inversions of large republicanism must be small scale only. For in an era of globalizing capital, climate change, destabilized border flows, and acutely felt military interdependencies, there are many ways in which the large republic is not large enough. Demotic large republican harmony will have to gather itself amidst multiple, shifting scales of social life, and indeed make its peace with a kind of void, a creative range of indeterminacies that are not captured by well-defined "scales," be they "large" or "small." There is in other words a void in and around the large republic, and progressive egalitarian critics of democratic life need theoretical

conventions that are better suited to thinking about them. Large republican denizens, both citizens and undocumented residents and others within the US capitalist and military orbit, need new political conventions too. This project's reconsideration of the atomist tradition is a modest contribution toward generating these kinds of conventions, demotic, aleatory, prudential, and materialist.

This dissertation tells a story about nature and conventions in order to think about what kinds of powers, attachments, and meanings might serve to generate commonalities in an unequal large republic. The story I tell tries to think about how large republics might imagine themselves otherwise in relationship to territory and space, to capitalism, to the Earth, as well as to other people and the government. I pursue three conventions in combination with a revised conception of nature, drawing on a range of linked traditions in the history of Western political thought.

The first chapter thinks about political harmony from the standpoint of ancient atomism. The chapter focuses on Lucretius' first century BCE Latin poem, *De Rerum Natura*, *The Way of Things*, with support from political fragments from Democritus and Epicurus. The atomists advance a particular conception of nature and several images of politics that follow from this conception of nature. For the atomists all reality is matter and void, where the material world emerges from both lawful and swerving atomic motion. "Void" for the atomists is both empty space and an active, turbulent force in its own right. The political conventions that follow from this conception of nature counsel both prudence toward other bodies and a sustained public sense of attachment and vigilance toward human affairs. "Ataraxy" for the atomists is a kind of shared sense of fate and meaning that obtains among people when nature, including the human natures

and conventions that nature encompasses, is thought and felt the right way. I argue that ataraxy involves a demotic element, in that it depends upon the expansion of politics to include new bodies, voices, surfaces, and sensibilities. I then go on to use the atomists' local materialism and demotic ataraxy to think about large republican inequality, contrasting the atomists' local matter with a twenty first century advertising campaign by the Dow Chemical company, "the Human Element." The local materialism of the atomists will be used throughout the dissertation as a way of thinking about nature. The political convention of demotic ataraxy will also be used in the subsequent chapters, although with the support from two other modern thinkers with deep links to ancient thought, Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt.

The second chapter will draw on Karl Marx's critique of capitalism and put it into conversation with local materialism. I will argue that inequality in the large republic needs a broader conception of capitalism, especially capitalism's capacity to organize matter and space into forms of "abstract" violence, including the creation of temporality. I will critically re-construct Marx's account of capitalist domination drawing upon his account of the "value" in "The Critique of the Gotha Program" and *Capital*. My reading of Marx will call attention to the various materialities that emerge in the course of his empirical account of capitalism's constitutive bodies and spaces. I will then put Marx's dialectical account of the value form into dialogue with the atomists, who were the subject of Marx's own doctoral dissertation. I will use the atomists to push Marx's critique of capitalist value away from dialectical finalism and toward a more aleatory image of nature, matter, and politics. The chapter will then conclude by reflecting upon

what this Marx/Lucretius critique of capital might mean for large republican capitalist globalization.

The third chapter turns to another modern thinker who is deeply engaged with ancient thought, Hannah Arendt. I will draw upon Arendt and Lucretius to take up the question of “political voice.” The Task Force report argues that inequalities of political voice make the amelioration of socioeconomic inequality more difficult. The Task Force, however, never formulates what the idea of political voice entails, equal or otherwise, and tends to figure voice according to behaviorist conceptions of participation. I argue that this conception of voice is radically inadequate and indeed contributes performatively and conceptually to voicelessness. I use Hannah Arendt’s account of plurality and power to formulate a more refined and ambulatory conception of voice for an unequal large republic that finds itself involved in even larger imperial projects. Arendt’s account of plurality is rooted in a phenomenological approach to specifically human modes individuation in historical time. This chapter takes these features of Arendtian plurality and carries them over into a different ontology, the atomists’ local materialism, which emphasizes the continuities between human and nonhuman voice. I go on to use Lucretius’ conceptions of the swerve, the void, and simulacra to bring Arendtian natality, spaces of appearance, and power into a world that is only matter and void. The chapter then attempts to formulate a demotic materialist conception of voice, one that accents human responsiveness to nonhuman voices. Here I draw on Anne Norton’s accounts of human-dog politics to argue that equalizing voice in an imperial large republic requires making empirical and ethical distinctions between human-nonhuman violence and human-nonhuman voice.

In the concluding chapter, I argue that democratic responses to inequality in the United States require a new demos, one gathered around new conventions of demotic ataraxy, class struggle in and around capitalist abstract time, and public voices with human and nonhuman forces. I then critically reflect upon the future of this project, thinking through the limitations of this dissertation and how they might be refined and enlarged for future studies of unequal demotic material life.

Chapter 1: Local Matter: Lucretius and Demotic Ataraxy

1.0: Introduction: 37.

1.1: Lucretius' Void: Ontology, Physics, and Empiricism: 39.

1.2: Between *Nomos* and the Garden: Demotic Empiricism: 52.

1.3: Demotic Ataraxy and "The Human Element:" 75.

But not all bodily matter is tightly-packed/ By nature's law, for there's a void in things.

- Lucretius⁴²

1.0: Introduction

The previous chapter argued that greater socioeconomic equality in the contemporary United States depends crucially upon the creation of what I have called "large republican harmony." "Harmony" here refers not to warm feelings or ideological consensus but on a common sense of shared fate, jeopardy, and possibility, one that might lead to new forms of public action. Harmony fails if it leads to idyllic fantasies of the polity's stability, to the citizens' persistent misrecognition of their situation in historical time and space, or their own relationship to nature, or the common dangers confronting them. For Plato, harmony is the natural and just relationship between the nonphysical souls of individual citizens and the three classes of citizens in the city.⁴³ For Aristotle, harmony is the common flourishing of the city and the good life of the citizen,

⁴² Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1968), 29.

⁴³ Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Richard Sterling and William Scott, (New York: WW Norton 1996), 171.

grounded in a teleological conception of nature that produces the “union” of the citizens.⁴⁴ James Madison’s large republican vision inverts both of these harmonies. Harmony’s impossibility is a hard and fast fact of nature, and its failures are best re-territorialized into factious dynamics, where the common good emerges mechanistically as the vagaries of human vices cancel one another out.

The differences between Plato’s, Aristotle’s, and Madison’s visions are immense. All three, however, share a finalistic and anthropocentric conception of nature, political conventions, and the human good life. For all three, politics depends upon a conception of nature that is itself orderly, knowable, and fundamentally congenial to the highest ambitions of human life: Plato’s knowledge of the unchanging Forms, Aristotle’s civic flourishing according the final cause of nature that is human happiness, Madison’s representatives’ virtuous exercise of the refined and enlarged view that secures liberty, private property, and the common good. The theories’ finalistic and anthropocentric imaginaries of nature and politics are bound up in complex ways with their various commitments to elitism, their worries about the demos, and how they read out a wide range of human and nonhuman forces and meanings from their otherwise disparate understandings of politics.

This chapter will argue for a different account of nature and the human political conventions that participate in nature. I will draw on the atomist tradition of Lucretius, Democritus, and Epicurus to argue for an image of political conventions that flow from a non-finalistic and non-anthropocentric involvement with nature: “local materialism.” Local materialism’s political theory is driven by a sense of nature’s turbulence, its

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Jonathan Barnes (London: Cambridge University Press 1996) 11.

aleatory swerves, its godlessness, and its resistance to human attempts to control it technologically, ethically, and politically. The common recognition of this sense of nature's turbulence leads a kind of political harmony, "demotic ataraxy."

In attempting to evoke this minor tradition of Greek and Roman political thought for the present day demands of large republican egalitarianism, I will first set forth a synoptic reading of the atomists' political theory, beginning first with their account of nature and continuing on with their understandings of politics and ethics. I will then attempt to bring this tradition into the present day by contrasting it with an image of nature that at first glance might seem to be very similar to it, a factious advertising campaign presented by the Dow Chemical corporation, "the Human Element."⁴⁵ I will then conclude by discussing how this theory of nature and politics suggests a new image of the demos in a globalizing large republic.

1.1: Lucretius' Void: Ontology, Physics, Empiricism

This section and the next set forth the local materiality of Lucretius by way of a reading of his poem *The Way of Things*. In this first section, I will discuss Lucretius' conception of void as it figures in his account of physics, bodies, and perception-as-knowledge. The next section will explore the ethics and politics of voidal materialism in Lucretius, Democritus, and Epicurus. Often read as an orthodox expositor of Epicureanism, Lucretius in fact occupies a loose and shifting intermediary position within ancient atomism, swerving in-between the *nomos*-centered laughter of Democritean comparative politics and the imperturbable moderation of the Epicurean Garden. Together this section and the next will elaborate upon the physics and the

⁴⁵ See www.dowchemical.com/Hu

ethics/politics/physics relationships in Lucretius' ontology, focusing on how Lucretius understands *void* as inhering in and around things, including human things.

The atomist tradition of Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius holds that all reality is matter and void.⁴⁶ Microscopic atoms swirl and intersect through void, aggregating into the visible macro-phenomena of bodies and worlds. There are multiple worlds and gods in the atomist universe, but the gods dwell far from our world off and away in the void and are in any event unconcerned with our lives. They do not punish us after death or control our fates. The ethical *telos* - perhaps merely the *hope* - for human life comes instead from the right kinds of contemplations of our own nature's contingency and finitude. *Ataraxia*, the resonating tranquility that frees the mind from disturbance and fear, is a naturally blessed material harmony that can be produced by recognizing our own human existence as just a contingent arrangement of matter and void, one that includes the fleeting mortality of a physical soul.⁴⁷ Through "systematic" (materialist) contemplation, the atomist escapes the domination of convention, law, and Religious Fear, and leads a life of justice and friendship with others, albeit at a certain active remove from conventional political life.⁴⁸

Atomism was a contested tradition, from within and from without.⁴⁹ Epicurus and his school challenged Democritus' physics, ethics, and politics while adopting much of the Democritean ontology.⁵⁰ The most important feature of Lucretius' ontology is the swerve, or *clinamen*, the propensity for atoms to occasionally deviate from their normal

⁴⁶ AA Long and DN Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* Volume I, (London: Cambridge University Press 1987) 4-15, 20-25.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112-124.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 149-153.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5

⁵⁰ James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics*, (London: Cambridge University Press 2006) 1-9, 193-200.

laminar downward descent through void. This was also the principal issue dividing Epicurus from Democritus.⁵¹ Contrary to Democritus' uniform conception of atomic motion, Epicurus held that atoms' motion through void exhibited both the uniform normalcy of laminar descent, the sheer randomness of the occasional swerve, and the interaction between the two as occasionally swerving atoms collide into the laminar rain and give rise to turbulent new trajectories that fly somewhere in-between flux and flow. The swerve is a moment of sheer contingency. The swerve generates new atomic vectors from which macroscopic orders of bodies and nature emerge. Epicurean ontology replaces Democritean atomic determinism, then, with a complex ontology of sheer chance in combination (or better, *collision*) with determinism, which in turn gives rise to emergent physical orders, with logics and natures that endure (for a time) throughout a particular, "local," region of infinite void. This is neither a universe of perfectly open possibility unhindered always and everywhere (such that "everything is possible"), nor is it a uniformly lawful universe of determinism (such that "everything is necessarily just so"), but instead paints a modally complex and queer universe that is sometimes lawful and sometimes not.⁵²

Lucretius writes that matter is substance, solid stuff.⁵³ The smallest units of matter are indestructible and indivisible particles, quanta, and their essential nature is to *stay put*, to resist motion and change.⁵⁴ The nature of void on the other hand is to *yield*, and so thereby "passively" *impel change*.⁵⁵ Matter is probably Lucretius' more

⁵¹ Long and Sedley *The Hellenistic Philosophers* 46-52

⁵² Long and Sedley *The Hellenistic Philosophers* 54

⁵³ Lucretius *The Way of Things* trans. Rolfe Humphries 34

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 35.

intuitively clear category for us. Void is much more obscure in contemporary terms. “*Void does exist*,” Lucretius argues, just as matter exists.⁵⁶ Why this insistence? Why not simply equate being with matter and nonbeing with void, leaving us with a (swerving) material monism? And in what sense can *void*, “empty space,” be said to exist, to constitute half of reality, of all being *qua* being? How can nothing be something? If *void does exist*, then void is *not* nonexistence, non-being, *mere* nothingness, and neither is it any kind of non-actualized or potential being, i.e., the origin of matter’s coming-to-being. Void for Lucretius is never the *nihilo* part of an *ex nihilo* genesis of matter. For one thing, matter has always been and always will be. For another, void also has a real and active being all its own.

Lucretius’ void can be understood as an active thing or force that is also itself an ontological principle of openness and creativity. For Lucretius void is the empty/spatial other to material substance, but it is also much more than this. For one thing, void is *the possibility* of matter’s motion and therefore the possibility for material change. Of course, mere empty space as such can easily exist in a deterministic universe governed by universal natural laws. But Lucretius’ void is something quite different from lawfully determined space. Lucretius explains the ontological significance of void by arguing that without void matter could not move and therefore could not change, so the possibility of matter’s moving must *be* void, or at least argue for the fact of void’s being. Void is real precisely because of the possibility that material things might be elsewhere and hence otherwise than they are. For Lucretius, both the potentiality and the actuality of change in matter, and for nature and the cosmos as a whole, are ontologically dependent upon the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

being of void. Void's being here becomes abstractly "modal," in the sense of (a) ontologically "fielding" the possibility for change and thus also (b) mediating the logical or metaphysical relation between aleatory contingency and lawful necessity as modes of change. On this rather abstract ontological formulation, void fields the possibility of a new bodies emerging through atomic change and therefore also carries the possibility of a new "way" for things to be. Void *fields* rather "grounds" or "establishes" the ontological possibility of change because hypostasis is not what Lucretius' spacey void is all about. Void does not erect foundations, and neither is it merely the name given to an absence. For Lucretius new ontological possibilities creatively emerge "locally" in and through void as novel configurations of (empty) space and (occupied) place.

On the other hand, Lucretius also describes void as a *force* that *impels* matter toward change and motion, which makes void much more physical and thing-like than abstractly modal.

By void I mean vacant and empty space,/Something you cannot touch. Were this not so,/Things could not move. The property of matter, its most outstanding trait, is to stand firm,/Its office to oppose; and everything/Would always be immovable, since matter/Never gives way [...] Were there no void, they would not only lack/This restlessness of motion altogether,/But more than that – they never could have been/Quickened to life from that tight-packed quiescence.⁵⁷

Consider the strange turn that Lucretius takes in saying that without void matter would *lack* the restlessness of motion. Void's being is somehow the ontological opposite of the lack of matter's restlessness and motion. This suggests then that there is more to void than inert space for the displacements of mass. *Energy* seems to be at work here in the void's quickening to life of matter (as matter's essence is always to "stand firm" "immovable.") Energetic dynamism is not here a feature of matter but of void itself.

Lucretius goes further with this energy/space formulation two stanzas later. "All bodies,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

then, must lack the power of movement,/Or you must grant that there's a void in things/From which each one derives its motive impulse.”⁵⁸ Again, it is not simply that matter would have nowhere to go, but rather that if matter *lacked void* (again, *not* the negative existential redundancy of a void of void), then matter would lack the fundamental get-up-and-go necessary for change.

However, even if void were to be more like an ontological principle and less like a force, this still does not for Lucretius make it a mere attribute or predicate of matter, as if void were metaphysically dependent upon matter. Matter is not the senior existential partner in Lucretius' ontology. Matter and void are logically and ontologically coeval. They exist as irreducible things in themselves and as essential predicates of everything else. Lucretius argues that you can no more take matter or void from something than you can take wetness from water.⁵⁹

Unlike contemporary conceptions of energy, Lucretius' void is *not* a “phase” of matter – its originary potentiality or the result of its dissipation- but exists independently of matter and on par with it ontologically and physically. Even in what Lucretius calls void's “yielding” to matter, void still *acts*, impelling or perhaps seducing atoms to motion. To call Lucretius an atomist or a materialist, then, is to only paint half of his ontology. Lucretius is also a void-ist - which is not at all like being a nihilist. Lucretius' ontology is half a-voidance, or if you like, a void dance. Void is a *space* that also has being and agency and force besides, and contains as well the primary modality by which things change. It might be tempting for modern readers to reduce void's being to something like “the space for contingency” or a certain kind of primary ontological mode

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 33.

of possibility, on the one hand, or on the other, a fundamental physical force on the order of what some physicists are looking for in Grand Unification Theory (if not something as utterly pedestrian as gravity plus Newtonian space). But Lucretius' void seems to be both a fundamental existential modality (the abstract possibility of change) and an ambulatory, incalculable, queer force at the same time (it quickens matter to life). As an energetic free-floating modality of being, void is the *force of events*, including the normal falling of events, the aleatory eventuality of the clinamen, and the encounter between the two. Void just is - physically and ontologically - the *way* of things.

Does matter in a void dance move toward a natural goal, an end-state, some central coordinate in space or time? Lucretius says no. Void is a *free-floating* energetic modal field because like matter it is infinite and without a center. So void's interaction with matter does not follow a line of development or stay within cosmological borders. If the universe had a center toward which things move, Lucretius argues, surely everything would have arrived there by now, as old as the universe is.⁶⁰ We as human matter would then in body and mind already be caught up in the *telos* of the centrifuge, which state of affairs would make impossible the real changes and motions that we see everyday. If void has no center, does it perhaps have an edge? Again Lucretius answers no. That void along with matter is both universal and infinite Lucretius demonstrates by way of a thought-experiment. Imagine that the universe is in fact finite. Now picture a javelin thrower standing on the edge of this finite universe. She throws the javelin into the beyond. If the universe is finite, two things are possible at this point. Either the javelin keeps going or it bounces back as if hitting a wall. If it keeps going, then the edge of the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 50.

universe was not really the edge after all, because what was a moment ago “the beyond” now contains a javelin in flight. Absurdly, the universe’s edge would then be expanding simultaneously with the javelin’s motion. If instead the javelin bounces back, then there has to be something there that blocks it, a something that is not a nothing and therefore part of the existing universe.⁶¹ As matter in a void dance, the universe is forever and everywhere. The universe then is nothing so banal as the set of all possible states of affairs, or finite matter plus infinite space. All bodies have being precisely as a predicate of *both* matter and void, or better, a predicate of the *encounter* of infinite matter and infinite void. Lucretius’ void dance, then, posits a historical but non-finalist universe, an open-ended sequence of both normal (laminar) and aleatory (swerving) occasions when void yields and matter moves upon their mutual encounter.

Lucretius’ void is much more than simple empty space, then. Void is a complex and active physical field that is also a “deeply” abstract ontological possibility for local change (be it in either deterministic and/or radically contingent modes). When an atom falls normally for a time and then happens to swerve just “anywhere” “for no reason,” void is actively and multiply *there* (and elsewhere too), yielding a path *in advance* of the atom’s straight and swerving trajectories. *Where* the atom is located at any given moment is also void, non-empty void filled-up as occupied place but still existent as a kind of container (rather than displaced out of existence by the atom’s stuff). Void is also infinite and without a *telos* or a center, which means that the matter/void cosmos of Lucretius is radically *open*, available for the emergence of new bodies and worlds. We can now identify five features of void: (1) the immateriality of empty space; (2) a container of materially occupied places; (3) the yielding and lively quickening force that

⁶¹ Ibid.

invites bodily motion; (4) the abstract ontological possibility of both lawfully deterministic and aleatory change; (5) an infinite universal field for an open, *telos*-free, non-providential, non-finalistic material cosmos. Features (1), (2), and (3) seem more or less physical, although perhaps problematically so, while (4) and (5) move away from the palpably concrete toward the more abstract realms of ontology, logic, and metaphysics, albeit in distinctly spatial-physicalist terms. I would argue that what is most important about Lucretius' conception of void is that all five of these features inhabit the *same single self-organizing field*. Void is all of these things at the same time, this even as void's precise configuration of these features shifts as void dances untouchably with matter. There are not multiple voids in the universe; the universe is only void and matter. Yet the infinite void half of cosmic nature is, all at once, both active yet yielding, empty here but occupied there, and at the same time both a physical cosmological motive force and an abstract ontological field that sets (and subverts) the possibilities for change. Void is an open, self-organizing field for material possibility that operates as a shifting play between (1) abstract modalities of necessary and contingent change and (2) emergent physical forces, spaces, and places.

Lucretius' atomism is also an ontology of macroscopic, palpable bodies. The energetic, ontologically queer complexity of void makes all the difference for bodies in *The Way of Things*. Bodies are constituted by both matter and void, and therefore combine matter's buzzing obstinacy toward change with void's open-ended turbulence. It would be a mistake, then, to figure bodily physics as merely indivisible quanta on an aggregated scale. Bodies for Lucretius are in fact profoundly divisible because there is void in and around them. Void, then, is (approximately) half the reason why bodies

change, move, grow, interact, vary, and die. The very dynamism, generativity, variety, and finitude of bodies all testify to the vitality of atomic motion in void.

Lucretius argues that palpable orders and natures *do* emerge out of this melee of matter and void, however. This may seem to be a difficult position to reconcile with the micro-level maelstrom that is the basis for all macro reality but Lucretius does insist on it. The macro-world is constituted by emergent aggregate phenomena whose origins at their deepest foundations of being are radically contingent. Yet Lucretius argues that the various orders and levels to matter have their own ontological coherences and stabilities. Macro-natures tend to maintain their cohesions despite the micro-flux of their origins.⁶² We should not expect a child to grow into an old man in the blink of eye, or for cows to grow wings and fly. Lucretius warns that even as by-products of contingent micro-processes children and cows have *natures* that can be coherently understood. Emergent phenomena are not the illusory ephemera of an essentially chaotic world, then, but empirically reliable things with relatively cohesive natures for Lucretius. Lucretius insists that it is better to attend to the fixed regularities that are the palpably observable by-products of atomic swerves. It is moreover possible to do this without assuming that the world was designed by the gods to be a certain way, especially an elementally human-friendly way, or that the universe has some other natural end toward which it is heading. Lucretius then is not tempted to collapse his open-ended, non-finalist conception of nature into a molecular helter-skelter, or to render macro-level phenomena ontologically suspect. The macro world is real enough for Lucretius, and in fact is as real as anything we can really know. The kinds of thought-experiments that today occur to students of

⁶² Ibid., 71.

quantum mechanics do not seem to attract Lucretius' imagination at all. In *The Way of Things*, aleatory atomism and macro-empiricism are simply not at all in conflict. If anything the aim of Lucretius' contingency-inflected atomism seems to be to somehow make the macro-level organicist world *more* plausible, more coherent and cohering, and more onto-poetically appealing, as an image of god-free natural order.

Embodied human consciousness is part of this natural order, too. Human minds also have normal fixed natures, even though our minds are like everything else in the macro-world emergent by-products of swerving atoms dancing with void. Yet despite having fixed mental natures Lucretius also argues that we have free will. Lucretius' answer to the free will/determinism question is that our exercise of free will, as when we voluntarily initiate the movement of a limb, is itself an instance of matter swerving.⁶³ Free will *is* a swerve, not the emergent by-product of a swerve's collisions. For Lucretius this is why we are not "matter's absolute slave."⁶⁴ As matter ourselves, we are free precisely when matter itself is free from the normal descent of particles through void. It is precisely those moments, when mental matter strays from its linear descent through void, that make us, like every body, better than automatons and allow us to participate in nature's creative originality. Willing freely does not separate the human from the material or the natural, but rather folds human originality into nature's originality, which at bottom remains the play between swerving particles and free-floating energetically real void. Our creative free will then hardly serves to prove the irreducibility of human minds to matter. Our free will for Lucretius is in fact *identical* with the swerving free will of matter and the energetic modal agency of void.

⁶³ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

This image of the materially embodied and void-fielded mind leads Lucretius to a peculiar form of empiricism. Lucretius argues that all knowledge comes from the senses, specifically *touch*.⁶⁵ Bodies are the most knowable things available to us, more so than ideas and certainly more so than Religion. We know bodies in the sheer particularity of their material macro-natures, rather than in their molecular constitution. These natures are moreover impossible for us to misperceive (almost). This is because our perceptions of bodies come from simulacra, which are thin surface films that are shed from bodies that loosely maintain their original shapes.⁶⁶ These simulacra travel through void and collide with our sense-organs, creating an impression upon our bodies of the original body upon impact. Because these simulacra are the cast off surfaces of actual bodies, our perception is almost as infallible as direct sensation. In other words, when we “see” bodies we are in fact directly touching their cast off floating surfaces. We can therefore know perceptions to be true in the same way that seeing (or touching) is believing. The possibility for misperception can only emerge as some simulacra from distant objects lose some of their shape as they travel through void, as in Lucretius’ example of the tower with square corners that appear to be round from a distance. What has happened here is that void has quickened the simulacra’s constituent matter to life over the course of its journey to our eyes. Yet the stuff of the simulacra and its arrangement preserves the shape sufficiently for empirical knowledge to emerge via sense-impression. The tower is real, although we may be deceived as to the precise contours of its edges, which bound it in/through void, this thanks to the matter-void dance attending the simulacra en route. The farther away the body in void, the greater the *possibility* for distortion. Yet there is

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 119-134.

no half-life calculation possible because void does not distort at a constant rate. Void is something we cannot touch that nonetheless also sometimes undertakes new quickening operations upon quanta, with open, aleatory consequences. This is why void cannot be “controlled for” epistemologically by as-if heuristic assumptions of lawful continuity, and this is also why void frequently interferes with our empirical knowledge of bodies over particular distances.

Atomism’s ontology and empiricism might seem to be at odds. Everything is really atoms and void, but we can only really know bodies that are large enough to touch. How it is possible then to know the existence of atoms and void, since quanta are too small to be perceived and void is precisely that which is untouchable? Lucretius’ answer is that both quanta and void can be inferred abstractly, in the way that a blind man might through reason infer the existence of visible qualities without himself actually seeing them. There are then two epistemological regions or levels within Lucretius’ ontology. The first are the macro-level bodies while the second is an equally real yet abstractly known matter in a void dance. Ontologically the atom-void encounter takes priority because it is what quickens and collides the bodies into generation, yet epistemologically the macro-bodies take precedence. Knowledge of the quantas’ existence, the finite quantity of their shapes, their indivisibility, the infinity of their number, and the various complex features of void all depend upon a series of quite abstract thought-experiments and meditations, which are not at all like direct sensation in their claim to truth. Here reason, logic, and sometimes aesthetics figure more prominently in *The Way of Things*, yet without producing hard-and-fast ideal/physical or analytic/synthetic distinctions. The epistemological implications of the matter void dance are complicated further by the fact

that the clinamen introduces an element of surprise and indeterminacy into the world that we are trying to know at both levels. There are limits to how well the matter void dance can be known, given the imperceptible scales and the swerves through which the dance proceeds. The very elusiveness of the matter/void field also limits our knowledge of macro-bodies, both because the bodies are sometimes at a distorting voidal distance and also because they have swerving atoms and untouchable void in them as well. We can, however, know the macro-world up to a point, and it is anyway more reliably real than many other things we might imagine, which is why Lucretius makes (within these limits) such a strong claim for a sensuously empirical criterion for knowledge.

Epistemologically, Lucretius suggests that we require a sensuous but chastened empiricism in order to know what we can (which is a lot) about the variety, generativity, and transitory natures of palpable bodies. This empiricism is chastened, however, because it is abstractly cognizant of the micro-level flux and flow that allows perceptions to constitute knowledge to a limited (but still considerable) degree.

1.2: Between *Nomos* and the Garden: Demotic Empiricism

[Reply of the senses to the Intellect] ‘Miserable mind, you get your evidence from us, and do you try to overthrow us? The overthrow will be your downfall!’⁶⁷

- Democritus, Fragment B 125

As with his epistemology, Lucretius’ ethics and politics are empirical too, in that his atomism depends upon a generously conceived physics of social bodies in palpable

⁶⁷ Democritus, in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, translated by Kathleen Freeman, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1983) 104.

change and motion. This is, as I have suggested, a chastened but sensuous empiricism, for it concerns itself with the “a-voidance” of pain as the goal for ethical life. *Ataraxia* entails freedom from pains of the body and pains of the unbalanced material soul, where matter must dance with void in just the right way as embodied reflexivity in order to produce the soul’s peace. *Ataraxia* requires knowing your self as a body and a physical soul, and knowing the bodies and souls of others too, while also knowing that all such things have void in and around them that enlivens and bounds their being. The void around social and political bodies invites a corporeal involvement with others while also demanding an active remove from the formal conventions of the political sphere. Conventional politics too often overlooks the vulgar turbulence of the materially embodied world. Because there is so much more going on with bodies than empires, republics, Religion, and other formally constituted polities realize, atomism prescribes a *demotic empiricism*, where a wider range for bodily generation, change, and motion becomes possible, allowing local matter to collide, cohere, and flow along new lines. Lucretius places his demotic empiricism somewhere in-between the Epicurean Garden and the Democritean *nomos*, which position allows him to poetically theorize the material situation of the Roman Republic during its crisis in the early first century BCE.

Lucretius lived from around 99 to 54 BCE, during what he calls “troubled times.”⁶⁸ The bloody tumult of the city during this period forms the political background of *The Way of Things*.⁶⁹ Lucretius’ subtly drawn themes of war, empire, and civic belonging should be read through this lived historical experience and its material contexts. An incomplete chronology might begin with Rome fighting the so-called

⁶⁸ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. by Rolfe Humphries 20.

⁶⁹ See Alessandro Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman politics and history,” in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (London: Cambridge University Press 2007) 41-58.

“Social War” against the enfranchisement of the Republic’s Italian allies, a war in which over 300,000 people were killed from 90-88 BCE. This was followed by several decades of periodic civil war and the so-called “Imperial” era of military power struggle between rival generals. In these years the Romans witnessed the coup (88 BCE) and dictatorship (81-79 BCE) of Sulla, the peninsula-wide slave revolt led by Spartacus (73 BCE), the dictatorship (48 BCE) and assassination (44 BCE) of Julius Caesar, and the eventual downfall of the Roman Republic and the emergence of the Empire a year later.⁷⁰ Political questions of citizenship, subjection, militarism, war, and peace were pressing, palpable realities during Lucretius’ thirty-four year lifetime, as Rome faced a raining succession of existential threats from without and from within. Who rightfully may claim Roman citizenship? What is the Roman Republic becoming? What are the territorial, religious, and existential foundations - and limits - of the city? What kind of world could the Roman people really believe in, in these years of chaos, violence, and terror?

“Do not believe in any world without its ABCs,” answers Lucretius.⁷¹ Lucretius’ atomic physics and our existential decision to believe in that physics are deeply interrelated. The ABCs are onto-ethical building blocks, metaphors for quanta which themselves also have a kind of creative space – a void - between them that fields the possibility for ethical and political change. Belief in the ABCs of noble living can also overcome a kind of existential fear - the Religious Fear of Death - that afflicts Rome. Following Epicurus, Lucretius argues that death is “nothing” to us because upon death we will feel no pain. The material soul’s void field will merely dissolve into a different arrangement of atoms in space. We will not “mind” dying because we will be

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 25.

constitutively incapable of perceiving our own sensory dissolution. Until then “suffering can be endured and evil overcome,” according to Epicurean doctrine, without the help of the gods or fear of an afterlife.⁷² Rome in troubled times must confront its own corporeal finitude and reject its Religious Fear.

Lucretius’ *The Way of Things* does invoke one goddess, Venus, an invocation that carries weighty political implications. Lucretius’ Venus is the Earth-Mother, a goddess of love who is also a primary world-body from whom all other bodies emerge and grow. Lucretius’ Venus is a Roman version of the Greek Aphrodite *pandemos*, the goddess of the people as a whole, loving and loved as a common earthly political body, this as opposed to the Aphrodite of rarefied aristocratic male love exalted in Plato’s *Symposium*. Lucretius’ Venus is also, as Michel Serres has argued, a rival to the martial Archimedean geometry symbolized by Mars, who regarded the demos’ body as more of a passive techno-cratological object for war than as a sensuously active and unruly political subject.⁷³ Lucretius’ invocation of Venus is what Sheldon Wolin calls a “demotic moment,” a call for the self-formation of the people from below into an open, enlarged material body, one that also would exceed the narrow formalizations of convention, law, and war.⁷⁴ These latter formations would fail to contain the emergent demotic body because they are too rooted in fear-production and thus always remain out of touch with nature. Demotic moments may result in democracies but they do not always; *they may also simply expand the range of people (and things) that are operative in the exercise of political action*. If Lucretius’ invocation of Venus is democratic, it is in the spirit of what

⁷² See James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics*, 34.

⁷³ Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, translated by Jack Hawkes, (Manchester: Clinamen Press 2001), 22-24.

⁷⁴ Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in Seyla Benhabib ed. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996), 43-44.

Wolin calls a “fugitive democracy,” a democracy emerging in flight from formal codifications, cultural refinements, and political boundaries of various kinds.⁷⁵ For this reason demotic politics are common, populist, perhaps even “coarse” or “vulgar.” Lucretius’ primordial “ABCs,” then, at one stroke figure both the liveliness of the mind’s reflexivity and the flux of physical quanta. His physics also loosely imply a politics: just as primordial motes mingle and form associations, so too might the more complex bodies of human individuals. Thus Lucretian physics invites the demos into a new, broadened, open mode of political self-formation. Atomism, as lived by Venus *pandemos*’ materialist children, who want peace over pain and truth over Religious Fear, can promote a *demotic empiricism*, inviting people to form new corporeal collisions, enriched simulacrum flows, and aleatory spatial arrangements that swerve to unsettle established political boundaries.

To broaden the range of sensible bodies in a political formation via demotic empiricism does not necessarily mean extending formal democracy - for example, through a universal franchise or constitutional rights. The main goal of demotic ataraxy is to gather the constituent corporealities of your city into an expanded field of action, one that may generate a palpably enriched public sense of the city for itself and its environs. This is consistent with democratization, to be sure, but need not entail it. Lucretius the demotic poet may or may not have been a radical democrat; it is in any case not clear what democratization might have concretely meant in Lucretius’ troubled times of civil war, or even in the ordinary political logic of Roman republicanism.

Democratic or not, what is clear is that Lucretius, lover of Venus *pandemos*, is also politically connected to the Roman Republic, with friends in high places as well as

⁷⁵ Ibid.

low ones. *The Way of Things* is dedicated to a man named Memmius, a member of an Epicurean community in Rome who was also Lucretius' financial patron.⁷⁶ Although a prominent Epicurean, Memmius was also a Tribune of the People and came from a wealthy and influential plebian family.⁷⁷ Lucretius' didactic poem on noble living addresses Memmius throughout, using the prominent public name as a fictive device in order to elaborate doctrine through the poem's playful simulation of a didactic philosophical lecture. In performing this simulated ethics lecture the poem also publicly addresses a prominent politician on delicate matters of political concern, including the nature of the Romans' religion, civic obligations, and wars. There are, then, contextual and textual politics at work in *The Way of Things*, all in combination with philosophical theory, practical schemes for ethical living, rhetoric, myth, and of course poetry. This also means that Lucretius' text is itself involved in a complex political provenance, one that runs counter to the orthodox Epicurean disavowal of public life. Lucretius's demotic (yet politically connected) ABC's make his poetry more involved in the declension of what he calls "the Roman line" than Epicurus' Garden ever was in the Athenian *polis*.

Lucretius' political ABCs were not lost on Cicero, the philosopher and senator, who was scathing in his criticism of Epicureanism generally while deeply admiring of Lucretius. In a letter to his brother in 54 BCE, Cicero writes that Lucretius' "poems" show "frequent flashes of genius, and yet [are] exceedingly artistic."⁷⁸ W. Glynn Williams interprets this line to mean that "Lucretius shows the *genius* of the old school (e.g., Ennius [...]), surprisingly combined [...] with the much of the *ars*, the more

⁷⁶ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 20.

⁷⁷ See Alessandro Schiesaro "Lucretius and Roman politics and history," 53.

⁷⁸ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, Vol. IV, ed. William Glynn Williams, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1926) 519.

polished craftsmanship of the New, or Alexandrine, School (e.g. Catullus).”⁷⁹ If Williams is right about what Cicero means here, then the senator is reading Lucretius as a new admixture of Ennius-style epic poetry, with its mytho-political focus on the divine and cosmological forces behind Rome’s founding, and the finely innovative, lapidary artistry of Catullus-style erotic poetry. This reading of *The Way of Things* as a “surprising combination” of “low” demotic love poetry and “high” cosmological-political epic would be very much in line with the interpretation of Lucretius as a demotically empirical political poet that I am advancing here.

It would also help to explain why Senator Cicero was here so uncharacteristically generous with his praise of an Epicurean philosopher. Cicero is famous for his public and private opposition to Epicureanism, and given the philosophical school’s weird relationship with the political, it is not hard to understand why.⁸⁰ Cicero almost certainly would have concurred with Peter Green’s recent assessment of Epicureanism during the Hellenistic period, that as a philosophy it was politically suspect and economically “unreal.”⁸¹ Green refers to Epicureanism’s insistence upon an almost absolute withdrawal from political matters, along with its bizarre, utopian refusal to recognize distinctions between men and women, plebes, nobles, and slaves, citizens and foreigners. Even more troubling than its egalitarian anti-politics to Cicero was Epicureanism’s subversive opposition to Rome’s civic religion, which position attracted high-ranking converts among Cicero’s friends (and enemies), much to his alarm. In its zeal as a philosophical movement, the Epicurean Garden did not simply wish to be left in peace, but quietly sought global expansion through metastasis, often through the recruitment of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 518.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Peter Green, *The Hellenistic Age: A Short History*, (New York: Random House) 120.

wealthy and prominent pupils.⁸² The “Garden” in fact originally referred to the site of Epicurus’ school in Athens, but later came to symbolize the Epicurean movement and practices in the transnational Hellenistic world. Various a philosophical school, a set of locations for ethical community and moral practice, a body for collective *ataraxia*, and the self-imagined *telos* for human civilization, the Garden stood apart - provocatively, subversively, but always peaceably and pleasantly - from the Athenian *polis*, the Roman Republic, and eventually the Roman Empire and the Christian Church. Epicureanism recognized the necessity for politics, but insisted that it was an instrumental rather than ethical affair, constituted loosely by “local” rational contracts for mutual advantages in aid and protection rather than by reverence for justice, religion, or tradition. Besides political pragmatism and prudence, the Epicurean movement promoted philosophical friendship via a cloistered version of *parrhesia*, the classical *polis* practice of free speech refigured as a frank ethical criticism between friends aimed at sustaining bodily freedom from disturbances of the soul. Otherwise the ideal was to “live unknown,” through strict avoidance of public speech and action. Voluntary poverty and simplicity of diet were also prescribed by the Garden, which belied the charged of wild hedonistic sensualism levied by the movement’s critics, who derisively called them pigs. By way of quiet rejoinder to these charges, Epicureanism embraced the symbol of the pig as the symbol of a noble, peaceful, healthy life. One statue from a Roman Epicurean community depicts a happy pig serenely flying through void.⁸³

The appropriation of the pig moniker attracts attention to the pleasures of *ataraxia* but also to the void between the Garden and the state. The Garden is something else,

⁸² Ibid., 119.

⁸³ See James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics*, 129-149.

somewhere else, quite a bit off from the city's public politics, and the easy laughter of the fearless flying pig gives ample testimony that the distance is both vast yet inviting and fluid. Here the Epicureans also seem to have appropriated Democritean laughter for their own material ends. The appropriation is a complex one, because Epicurus dissented strongly from Democritus on both physics and politics and the connection between the two.

Democritus joined physics to ethics and politics too. Democritean atomism, however, orbited and entered the *polis* more directly, albeit from the perspective of a kind of comparative political science undertaken during a long period of intra-Hellenic warfare. Democritus of Abdera, a contemporary of Socrates, traveled the Greek world circa 425 BCE or so, most likely during the Peloponnesian War, and apparently lived well into the fourth century BCE, perhaps long enough to read Plato's work.⁸⁴ His philosophical work addressed a wide range of questions, including topics in physics, astronomy, and ethics. During his travels he also undertook systematic studies of what we might today call comparative politics.⁸⁵

All but stray maxims from Democritus' philosophy were lost. The most famous fragment, labeled "B9" by Diels and Kranz, introduces the matter void dance in play with *nomos*. "By *nomos* sweet, by *nomos* bitter, by *nomos* colored, but in reality matter and void."⁸⁶ *Nomos* here might be translated as either convention or law. The fragment may be referring to just any conventional human practice or more directly to the formal political authority of law. Either way, what *nomos* really means is matter and void. If

⁸⁴ Ibid 29. See also Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*, (London: Cambridge University Press 1989) 192-264.

⁸⁵ See Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* 192-3.

⁸⁶ See Democritus, *Ancilla to the Presocratic Philosophers*, 93.

there are multiple nomoi, in different sizes and locations, perhaps built upon one another or connected by other bodies, then the ethics of B9 might suggest a demotic empiricism of subversion and skepticism. Indeed, Democritean epistemology also seems to be more skeptical than Epicurus and Lucretius of simulacra as reliable sources of knowledge.

Democritus declares that given the nature of perception as simulacra in void, we cannot really claim to know anything for certain. Yet ethics and politics are importantly informed by materialism, for Democritus. Great disturbances in the soul caused by too wide an oscillation of the soul atoms are to be avoided, Democritus argues, and one way to do that is to observe the troubles of others at a distance and count your blessings.⁸⁷

Lucretius makes the identical argument in *The Way of Things*. Here the void of oscillation is to be rearranged as well as the void between you and the troubled simulacra of other people. Your reflexivity, which is *also* matter and void, can rearrange both matter void fields in the right way to produce the desired peace of mind. To repeat, for it is easy for the non-atomist to forget, *both* our suffering and our ethical responses to it are really just matter and void in various arrangements of self-organization, some of which are ethically good, some not.

The same goes for the *polis* too, which is a far more important site for ethical life for Democritus and Lucretius than for Epicurus. There is no equivalent to the Garden Democritus' thought. His atomist politics does not organize itself into a materialist counter-culture, a subversive social movement, or a self-selecting therapeutic school for noble living. Democritean atomism orbits the *polis* with a wary and vigilant militancy, without faith in gods' providence or justice, just matter and void in the right arrangements. The Peloponnesian War and its aftermath colored Democritus' atomistic

⁸⁷ Ibid.

comparative politics. Gregory Vlastos has suggested that Democritus' ethics are deeply linked with those of Thucydides.⁸⁸ For both Democritus and Thucydides, the inter-*polis* world was a dangerous place, where proportionality, prudence, and consequentialism mattered much, while natural or divine schemes of transcendental justice mattered not at all. For there are voids both within and between cities. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that this more turbulent *polis*-centered character of Democritean ethics allowed atomism to avoid what Nietzsche took to be the moraline and supine disposition of orthodox Epicureanism, with its political quietism, slavish disregard for social distinctions, and its bizarre life-denying regimen of dry wheat-cakes and weak wine. Perhaps it is fair to say that Democritean ethics and politics had more void in them and fewer macro-bodies with normal natures who connect back directly to Venus pandemos. That would certainly explain some of the Mars-like/martial formulations that are involved in Democritus' state of nature and social contract fragments. Yet in many fragments Democritus sounds very much like a democrat, albeit rather a hawkish one.

Poverty under a democracy is as much to be preferred to so-called prosperity under autocracy as freedom to slavery.⁸⁹

One must give the highest importance to affairs of the State, that it may be well-run; one must not pursue quarrels contrary to right, nor acquire a power contrary to the common good. The well-run State is the greatest protection, and contains all in itself; when this is safe, all is safe; when this is destroyed, all is destroyed.⁹⁰

When the powerful prevail upon themselves to lend to the indigent, and help them, and benefit them, herein at last is pity, and an end to isolation, and friendship, and mutual aid, and harmony among the citizens, and other blessings such that no man could enumerate.⁹¹

⁸⁸ See Gregory Vlastos "Ethics and Physics in Democritus." *Philosophical Review* 55, no.1 (1946): 53-64.

⁸⁹ See Democritus, *Ancilla to the Presocratic Philosophers*, 114

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

The fragments above show Democritus the demotically empirical democrat. Here is Democritus the voidal inter-*polis* hawk.

With certain animals, the rule for killing them or not stands thus: any that do wrong and wish to do so may be killed with impunity, and it conduces to well-being to do so rather than not do so.⁹²

One must at all costs kill those creatures which do hurt contrary to justice. The man who does this has the greater share of cheerfulness [?] and justice and courage and property [?] in every ordered society [than he who does not.]⁹³

As has been laid down [by me] regarding beasts and reptiles which are inimical [to man], so I think one should do with regard to human beings: one should, according to ancestral law, kill an enemy of the State in every ordered society, unless a law forbids it. But there are prohibitions in every State: sacred law, treaties, oaths.⁹⁴

The last fragment does not argue that sacred oaths are worthy of respect independent of their political circumstances; rather it argues that violating such oaths will do more harm for the polis than good. It is the good of the polis that is at issue, not the will of a god or some global standard for reverence or piety. Kill the enemies of the State, for there is a void within and in-between human bodies and *nomos* itself, which requires constant attention and readiness, lest the void rearrange things to the polity's peril. Neither people nor states are indivisible. The matter void dance in and about people and states can and should strive toward well-ordered arrangements. Democritus denies the micro-level swerve in the way of things, and holds that in the macro-world prudential virtue that is mindful of voidal arrangements can maintain the wholeness of political bodies. "Chance" in political affairs is just a compliment that the weak and

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 115.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

foolish pay to their own incompetence. If you know enough to kill a dangerous animal, you know that politics is just determinable matter and void.

Compare Democritus' hawkish voidal prudence with Epicurus' demotically empirical void.

He who best knew how to meet fear of external foes made into one family all the creatures he could; and those he could not he at any rate did not treat as aliens; and where he found even this impossible, he avoided all encounters, and, so far as was expedient, kept them at a distance.⁹⁵

Here Epicurus challenges, and mocks, Democritean prudentialism. To meet the fear of external foes, you do not start with the *polis*, the pre-given political body, and then purge it of all criminals, aliens, subversives, and enemies, killing them as you would wild animals. Foes are indeed (dangerous) *creatures*, but our fear of them calls for a different response. Epicurus would instead create a new bio-political family, an artificial genus of naturally diverse living bodies, with the urgent aim of greater belonging and attachment. There will be strains to this effort, which will demand considerable artifice. To make into one family all the creatures you can is neither easy nor entirely safe but it is the best way to meet enmity. There are limits to this how far this first demotically empirical approach will work. Some creatures will remain outside your new family, but even then you should still not treat them as wholly other to you. Their very *creatureliness* should argue for some larger space or range – an active void - of generous commonality, albeit an extra-“familial” one. This second approach, which is more voidal than the first more corporeal one, also has its limits. The third approach is even more voidal yet, wherein those creatures who cannot but be met as aliens are kept at arms length, at a cautious and actively shifting remove, this again rather than hunted down and killed. This void is

⁹⁵ Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines and Letter to Menoeceus*, translated by Robert Drew Hicks (Middletown: Delaware Press 2015) 9.

about carefully keeping bodies from colliding catastrophically. It is better to *a-void* those to whom you cannot help but be alien, which is to say to evade the place for encounter and collision, if you can. *If* in fact democratic Athens could never really be other than alien to the martial dual monarchy of Sparta, then perhaps a policy of non-confrontation and non-expansionism could have kept enmity from becoming warfare, plague, defeat, and tyranny. Such is the ethical hope of Epicurus' "triple void" for inter-polis prudence.

There is also in Epicurus' rejoinder to Democritus a kind of ethical laughter of generosity and subversion. Epicurus' smiling contrast between gathering creatures and killing them argues for an enlarged ethical and affective dimension to atomist political prudence, a dimension that would be obscured in Democritus' hawkish, rigid *polis*. The plausibility of a more generous response to foes swerves the ethics of creaturely materiality, this without denying the dangers of the inter-polis world. *Polis* matter can become ethical by attending more reflectively to its emotional and affective dispositions, "meeting" its fears with a more varied range of bodily attitudes (familial, friendly, guarded) toward many different kinds of creatures. Far from denying the *tragic turbulence* of the geopolitical condition described by Thucydides and Democritus, Epicurus' demotic family void intensifies its palpable complexities, arguing for an enlarged empiricism for questions of war and peace. An enlarged empiricism for political bodies allows the prudent family builder to pay close attention to a wider variety of creaturely matter, including small but important differences of culture, natural and artificial environments, and economic life. The main foreign policy difference between Epicurean pigs and Democritean hawks is that the Epicurean political bestiary goes empirically *far beyond* the hawkish friend/enemy distinction, and thereby loosens the

internal coherence and external boundedness of the state. The Garden thereby takes on a quasi-political function of cultivation and gathering in-between *nomoi* that the state as such is unlikely to perceive and anyway powerless to perform. Yet in doing so the Garden leaves also behind the specific ethical obligations of *polis* citizenship that Democritus defends, including matters of civic harmony, equality, justice, and the common good.

Lucretius' demotic empiricism arranges itself in-between these Democritean and Epicurean positions. *De Rerum Natura* is about Rome – as a people, a city, and as a republic on the way to becoming an empire through fearful conquest, militarism, and dictatorship. Unlike Epicurus, Lucretius' *ataraxia* does not playfully resist civic obligation to the state, but urgently embraces it as the central impulse of his poem. Nowhere in his poem does Lucretius mention the Garden or the Epicurean movement, even though several Epicurean schools and communities thrived in Rome at this time. Neither is *ataraxia* for Lucretius restricted to the more intimate practices of philosophical friendship and community. On the contrary, Lucretius' poem proposes *ataraxia* as a civic, public tranquility for the Roman people. Indeed, Lucretius tells us early on that *his own soul's peace depends upon the Roman "commonweal."*⁹⁶

Yet Lucretius is no hawk. His civic ataraxy is quietly anti-militaristic and deeply skeptical of imperial designs, this for a wide range of existential, ecological, and epidemiological reasons. Rome is also, Lucretius repeatedly insists, porous and finite. Rome's foundations are shifting and transient; the city is already, as it were, in inevitable laminar "decline" or "fall." The hope of civic ataraxy for Lucretius consists in precisely recognizing Rome's existential finitude, such that "death is nothing" to its people and the

⁹⁶ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 20.

anxieties of Religious Fear and imperialist glory-seeking might be overcome with a materialist scheme of natural contemplation. Lucretius poetically posits voids in and around Rome, and in doing so rides a demotic swerve that expands the range of bodies that are active in the city's foundation and political life.

The Way of Things is, among other things, the story of Rome's founding, and also a prescription for its (finite) preservation. The poem is in this sense an anti-epic, or better, a *queered* epic, one that naturally desacralizes the state within a shifting range of quickened turbulence. Where Democritus urges local respect for civic cults, Lucretius argues against them for the civic good. Rather than a mythical martial epical history that sings with Virgil of arms and the man, Lucretius paints Rome's founding as a gradual Venus-blessed love affair with natural history, such that the city's people become involved with a widened array of bodies that connect back ultimately to a generous Earth. Venus as Earth mother overcomes Mars in the poem's opening, as "war's fierce duty" yields to an erotic/maternal love of corporeal generativity.⁹⁷ This invocation of Venus' wisdom is ultimately self-subverting – Lucretius will argue later that the marvels of organic generation in fact flow from the insentient non-divine planetary body that is the Earth. But by then Lucretius will have already accomplished the recasting of the city's founding corporeality in terms of generosity, care, and generativity, and away from martial ferocity, violence, and destruction. *The bodily matter of Rome is essentially creative and generous* for Lucretius, and laughingly evocative of the mythic sensibility of Venus pandemos. Mars' severe bellicosity is lulled, seduced, even incorporated into a demotic civic body that is affectively disinclined toward – which is to say, *swerved against* - imperial expansion and Religious Fear.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Lucretius' desacralization of Rome does not merely argue that local cults and rituals are inattentive to the empirical complexities of nature and culture, although he argues this too. "Death is nothing" to us, and so in an important way the Religious Fear of Death depends upon false beliefs in what is ultimately unreal. Lucretius describes the physical sites of altars and allegedly divine places (including Jupiter's clouds) and naturalizes them through scientific explanation and reasoned skepticism, thereby evacuating the locations of the divinity.⁹⁸ Lucretius' matter/void empiricism, to the modern ear, seems to be naturally at odds with the divine, but in the ancient Roman context empiricism (of a sort) and materiality were closely aligned with religion and ritual specifically. As Clifford Ando has argued, Roman gods were understood to be eminently material beings.⁹⁹ Roman ritual was itself an epistemically empirical procedure, complete with criteria for palpable verification and with geographical sites where such truths were reliably produced. Lucretius' irreligious materialism, then, does not merely champion materialist immanence over rival ontologies of spiritual transcendence (the immortality of the soul, for example). Lucretius' demotic empiricism also *desacralizes materiality itself* by subverting official Roman ritual empiricism in favor a different kind of ethical and political life.

Belief in the world's ABCs resists "Religion." Lucretius wants a break, bright and clean, between true thoughts about nature and the mystifications and violences of Religion.

When human life, all too conspicuous,/Lay foully groveling on earth, weighed down/By grim Religion looming from the skies,/Horribly threatening mortal men, a man,/A Greek, first raised his mortal eyes/Bravely against this menace. No report/Of gods, no lightening-flash, no thunder-peal/Made this man

⁹⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁹⁹ See Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2009) 1-25.

cower, but drove him all the more/With passionate manliness of mind and will/To be the first to spring the tight-barred gates/Of Nature's hold asunder. So his force,/His vital force of mind, a conqueror/Beyond the flaming ramparts of the world/Explored the vast immensities of space/With wit and wisdom, and came back to us/Triumphant, bringing news of what can be/And what cannot, limits and boundaries,/The borderline, the benchmark, set forever./Religion, so, is trampled underfoot,/And so by his victory we reach the stars.¹⁰⁰

The Greek is Epicurus. It is thanks to the vital force of his mind that we are free from Religion's looming. Once we have learned the limits of things, the forever-fixed boundaries, we can achieve the incredible. Like Epicurus, our minds will explore "the vast immensities of space" – the void - until we finally "reach the stars." This is no throwaway line for Lucretius. The very *vastness* of space is existentially fundamental for Lucretius' ethics and politics. No gods ever stopped Epicurus for thinking the void with wit and wisdom, for all of his passionate boldness and manly mind, and neither will they stop us. Religion *will* try to stop us, though, mainly through Fear, particularly Fear of Death. The existential possibility of overcoming fear is one good reason to intellectually resist Religion's false pieties. A second and related reason is that there is an onto-political connection between nature and religion. Nature is the real thing that Religion mystifies for its own purposes. There is something *there* behind the veil, a true order that can be grasped for the noble end of humane living. The veil itself is more than just a cover or an illusion. There is a kind of *bad life* that Religion produces through domination. Religion thrives parasitically through its own distortions and obscurities. It is not just a bad dream but a bad dream that is also itself a perversely vital material reality, the "groveling" "foul" forms of "human life."

Human life is nobler for Lucretius when it recognizes its creaturely continuities with nonhuman life and nonorganic things. In this respect the metaphoric animality of

¹⁰⁰ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 20.

Epicurus' and Democritus' state of nature debate becomes more literal and less anthropocentric in *The Way of Things*. Lucretius' bestiary, and earth science, is set against Religious Fear throughout the poem. Whether it is animals or human daughters who are set upon sacrificial altars, it is all alike in its crazed, bloody pathos and consequent futility. In the case of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Lucretius denounces the altar murder as exemplary of how Religion "mothers" "crime and wickedness." The stuff of nobility is fielded elsewhere and otherwise, away from the narrow borders of ritual and official *nomos* space. Helping Rome through its present strife and dangerous self-aggrandizements requires that its citizenry come to understand themselves as a richer collection of bodies amid creaturely familial voids. In hopes of bringing the Romans to their senses, Lucretius relates a kind of evolutionary theory and natural history that presage the atomist social contract, and insists upon human animal finitude and the noninvolvement of gods in human species destiny. Rome's foundations are those of a porous, living, and nonliving material body, not providentially hallowed ground, and this makes all the difference as to how citizens might relate existentially to the city's contingent, turbulent development upon the Earth, and also to its inevitable decline and death.

Lucretius' demotic empiricist civics depends upon widening the range of bodies and their effects that are palpably evident in Roman life, which can help citizens to understand that the city is itself a living finite body too. This involves poetic appeals to nature's beauty and pathos, but also requires close descriptions of physical bodies, their powers and limits, and the active spaces within and between them. Again unlike the epic poetry of Ennius or Virgil, Lucretius does not sing of arms and the man in a god-directed

providential cosmos, this in order to recover a lost *telos* of martial glory and historic destiny. Rather, *The Way of Things* poetically demotes the Roman line into an open, wider, ongoing natural history. The city and the Roman line is figured as a mortal but generative body that is itself made up of a loose collection of smaller bodies, all of which flow locally from the surface of the Earth. Lucretius' Rome, then, does not center upon an altar, a temple, a Senate, an aristocracy, or a battlefield. Lucretius repeatedly rejects divine sites and militarized bodies and spaces in favor a broadened, ambling orbit of corporeal variety and generativity, which is why his poem elaborates upon the physical details of climates, species, organic environs, inorganic textures, animal affects and behaviors, tiny motes and enormous landscapes, among many other kinds of naturalistic stuff. We have mentioned the first instance of this in the opening of the poem, where Mars the soldier is gently engulfed by Venus pandemos. Here the Earth gathers Rome away from "war's fierce duty" and moves the city toward a naturalist ataraxy, joining the people to cows, flowers, birds, the ocean, and the sky in kind of lulling harmony. The second book of the poem continues this argument more pointedly, with more politics than aesthetics. Here Lucretius invokes the sweet pathos of *ataraxia*, noting the relief that comes from observing at a modal distance evils from which you yourself are free.¹⁰¹ He then describes a violent battlefield and condemns "wars for precedence" and the vain strivings for wealth and power. There is a rain of bad living that Religious Fear produces for a city, a destructive procession of bodies in needless suffering. Later, this martial civic parade of Religious Fear is contrasted to the rain of atomic motes dancing in sunlight ("like armies in maneuver") and the procession of the human race in tandem with individual animal lives, where even a mother cow searches after her calf sacrificed

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 52.

upon Religion's bloody altar.¹⁰² To achieve civic ataraxy, Lucretius urges the Roman line to contemplate the variety of natural and material bodies that make up their city. It is demotic bodies – coarse, often unruly - that Rome must better sense for their own peace of mind, and not the cleaner, more circumscribed bodies of soldiers, priests, nobles, or gods. Rome is just one composite body among many others that flow from the Earth, which fact demands a richer empiricism if its citizens are to face up to their own limits in time and space and so quiet their fears. For even the city's paving stones and bronze statues are beginning to thin away.¹⁰³

With Rome's corporeal finitude in view, Lucretius ends his poem with an extended and chilling description of the plague of Athens in 429 BCE.¹⁰⁴ Lucretius has by this point demystified epidemiology too, while also suggesting that peoples have their own native healthy habitats beyond which it is unwise to expand or colonize. Lucretius' verse here follows closely the description of the plague in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. Here Lucretius reveals to the Roman line a deathly shifting rearrangement of the inter- and intra-polis matter void dance. Such things really can happen to an imperially-minded city – “no god's will about it,” just a calamitous array of bodies in the wrong kind of emergent space. The ghastliness of the plague strips bare the conventions of law, custom, and Religion, in the manner of Democritus' B9. Nomos' matter and void become all too real as corpses pile up and burn, rituals for the dead are abandoned, and the survivors go mad from their terror and grief.

Lucretius' verse lingers over the physical details of Athens' civic death, the tone at turns horrified, pathetic, stoical, and blackly humored. Scholars have wondered why

¹⁰² Ibid., 52-54.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 232-236.

the sixth and final book of *De Rerum Natura* ends so abruptly upon this grisly moment.¹⁰⁵ The beauty of the verse's death descriptions, and the biographical possibility that Lucretius may have committed suicide before the work's completion, have led some to suggest that Lucretius himself entertained a death-wish, and that his poetic account of the plague might be understood as a kind of death-worship.

I would argue that the sixth book's plague verse is in fact deeply consistent with Lucretius demotic/civic ataraxia, and that this has nothing to do with death-worship or suicidal tendencies of any kind. Neither is Lucretius subversively *calling for* the "downfall" of Rome. Death is, after all, "nothing" to the atomist – it is neither good nor ill. The ill for Lucretius comes from fearing death to the point of existential-bodily distortion, weakness, and domination. Lucretius is not a death-obsessed nihilist, but a demotic voidal civic materialist, a political poet who wants the blessings of nature for his city. Lucretius' discussion of the long ago plague is indeed a warning to Rome, but it is also a versified and public species of what Pierre Hadot has called "spiritual exercise," a way for his fellow citizens to count their blessings, and achieve their souls' peace, from an active modal distance.¹⁰⁶ The bodily sufferings of imperial/democratic Athens during the Peloponnesian War are gruesomely recounted to exemplify the wrong kind of thinking about the materiality of political being. The Romans' systematic contemplation of Athenian plague death can do a lot of good for the living. Existentially-driven bellicosity and Religious Fear of Death can be undermined by civic reflection upon the Athenians' pathos, which in turn might allow for a variety of better atomic arrangements

¹⁰⁵ See Alessandro Schiesaro, "Lucretius and Roman Politics and History," 87-94.

¹⁰⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, translated and edited by Arnold Davidson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1994.

within the citizen's souls and among their bodies, and the bodies of non-Romans too, in local regions of political void.

Following Democritus, Lucretius' empiricism argues that the "overthrow" of a city's senses for the sake of the immaterial mind - be it through the wayward abstractions of Religion, imperial hubris, or Platonism - will result in its "downfall," the unwelcome early return to the laminar rain that dissolves all bodies sooner or later. Lucretius also follows Democritus in linking materialist ontology and empiricist epistemology to a demotic politics of intra-civic solidarity and generosity, and extra-civic prudence toward outsiders. Swerving against the Epicurean refusal of public speech and civic action, Lucretius sings a public poem for the tranquility of an existentially afflicted, convulsing republic. *De Rerum Natura* is by half Democritean *nomos*-centered laughter, by which the philosopher affirms his citizenship in polis laws/conventions while also pointing toward "the city limits" (in both time and space), for *nomos* is in reality just matter and void in an atomic rain. If Lucretius is officially silent on questions of justice, foreign policy, and other public affairs of his day, neither does he enjoin Rome to embrace the explicit withdrawal from civic life that was characteristic of the Garden and prescribed explicitly by the Epicurean canon. Lucretius is a poet of *nomos*, and especially the bodies and voids that dance through and around *nomos*. Yet there is also a large dose of the Epicurean ethic of cultivation in Lucretius, one that does not merely affirm *nomos* while laughing its existential finitude but also attempts to *therapeutically intervene* within it, modestly, quietly, creatively, within and in-between peoples. Lucretius' demotic empiricism widens the range of bodies and void far beyond given conventions of citizenship, and also systematically demystifies local cults and sacred sites, this contrary

to the Democritean injunction to leave such things alone. The open associational sensibility – the friendship - of the Garden leavens and renders more generous Lucretius’ social physics, which refigure the matter (and void) of the Roman line, even as they are emptied of claims to divine providence, immortality, or global dominion. Lucretius would instead have the Romans gather into one family all the creatures that they can, lest the image of Mars sever their republic’s connection to nature’s limits and the generativity of the Earth. There is indeed a void in and around Rome, and the question is whether a demotically creative and prudential ethics and politics can rearrange it into a more viable form of local matter. This hope does not reflect any sort of death-wish on Lucretius’ part, although the palpable possibility of civic death *might* focus the minds of a polity tempted by the cavernous (and cadaverous) voids of empire and tyranny. Chancy though it may be, demotic ataraxy may be the Roman line’s best bet.

1.3: Demotic Ataraxy and “The Human Element”

History rained against Lucretius’ political vision. The Roman Republic did not survive the materialist poet by more than a few decades, although Rome endured as an Empire for three centuries longer. So militarist *Pax Romana* won out over Lucretius’ demotic *pax ataraxia*. Neo-Epicureanism survived Rome’s downfall, but not unmodified. Neo-Epicureanism transformed from a doctrinally-organized way of life to an occasional, scattered, underground philosophical tradition, a fuzzy red thread of anti-determinist materialism distinct from both the dominant materialism of Aristotelian teleological essentialism and, much later, the mechanically law-like materiality of Newtonianism.

Sustaining Lucretius' gentle configuration of atomistic physics, materialist philosophy, didactic poetry, therapeutic ethics, and demotic politics is difficult. Today these different aspects of Lucretian voidal materialism take separate trajectories. Various moments in Lucretius' poem anticipate important lines of modern thought, including biological evolution, the quantum physics of modern cosmology, the ecological conception of the Earth advanced by Green politics, and materialist theories of the mind/body problem, not to mention the many, many kinds of "naturalism" that animate contemporary art and poetry, or the sometimes metaphysically inclined moments of conscious hip-hop. The original sense of Lucretius' own array of these elements gets lost once these trajectories fly apart and intermingle with other traditions and perspectives. The challenge for the *neo*-Lucretian is to keep at least several of these elements sufficiently proximate to one another so that they may at least occasionally make contact, especially the physics/ethics/politics relation. Another challenge is to separate local materialism from its false friends.

For one example of local materialism's false friends, consider Dow Chemical's media campaign called "The Human Element" ("Hu"), which kicked off in 2006 and featured an award-winning series of television and Internet commercials. The videos begin with images of molecules bonding, and then show people – mostly children – dwelling within a series of environments from across the globalized worlds. The settings are lushly varied in their colors, scales, textures, and light. Human colors participate in the visual argument, too, as an array of facial close-ups assemble a post-national community of regular people inhabiting vivid local spaces. We see everyone living in a mellow splendor of ambient ordinariness. We see a close-up of a child's eye, also

exquisitely hued, meeting our gaze and alertly sizing us up, drawing us into her own local corner of globalization. A narration accompanies the images:

For each of us there is a moment of discovery. We turn a page. We raise a hand. And just then, in a flash of a synapse, we learn that life is elemental. And this knowledge changes everything. We look around and see the grandness of the scheme. Sodium bonding with chlorine. Carbon bonding with oxygen. Hydrogen bonding with oxygen. We see all things connected. We see life unfold. And in the dazzling brilliance of this knowledge, we may overlook the element not listed on the chart – its presence is so obvious, its importance is simply understood. The missing element is the human element. And when we add it to the equation, the chemistry changes. Every reaction is different. Potassium looks to bond with potential. Metals behave with hardened resolve. And hydrogen and oxygen form desire. The human element is the element of change. It gives us our footing to stand fearlessly and face the future. It is a way of seeing. It gives us a way of touching – issues, ambitions, lives. The Human Element. Nothing is more fundamental. Nothing is more elemental.¹⁰⁷

Hu promotes what Roger Rouse has called the “transnational” imaginary of capitalist globalization.¹⁰⁸ Transnational imaginaries today govern a wide range of mass cultural production; they are also a particular concern of image advertising for large corporations. Transnationalist rhetoric reconfigures “the map and the clock” of the new global marketplace, recalibrating social paces, spaces, and places to the new interstitial operations of capitalist flow.¹⁰⁹ Transnationalism discourse also prescribes what kinds of subjectivities, identities, and class relations should follow from post-Fordist imperatives for flexible specialization and the deracination of labor. As a transnational variant of what Lauren Berlant has called “infantile citizenship,” Hu’s “children” figure the transnational through their multicultural political newness and flex-spec fecundity.¹¹⁰ The kids are globalization’s metonymic futurity. They are the bio-politically mobile

¹⁰⁷ See www.dow.com/Hu

¹⁰⁸ Roger Rouse, “Thinking Through Transnationalism: Notes on the Cultural Politics of Class Relations in the Contemporary United States,” in *Public Culture* 7, no. 2 (1995): 353-402.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press 1997) 25-35.

signifiers of “issues,” “ambitions,” and “lives” that Hu preemptively salutes. Hu’s futurist globalism no doubt seeks to divert attention from the ignominious particulars of Dow Chemical’s past, including its napalm and Agent Orange production during the Vietnam War and the catastrophe in Bhopal caused by Union-Carbide (which was acquired by Dow in 2001). Hu’s rhetoric of global community may also serve the transnational firm’s more pressing present-day interests. As multinational governance regimes and transnational publics complicate inter-firm, firm-state, firm-labor, and firm-finance relations, the creative deployment of global corporate public identities becomes vital. If successful, such narratives and images make way for new rhetorical maneuvers in an ideologically stochastic world. Like much corporate advertising, Dow Chemical’s Hu edges into this hegemonic positioning, but it does so in a particular way.

Hu gains much of its rhetorical power from its re-imagination of materialism, and specifically the ethical and political implications of global capital’s materiality. Hu’s narration argues, weirdly, that human life and anthropocentric ethics undergird *all* material being *qua* matter, including the ways in which material being is felt, known, and used. Yet Hu’s imagery does resonate with a profound *material sense* that our experiences of collective life and physical being are changing radically through capitalist globalization. Hu imagery achieves this by evoking a sense of physical wonder that inter-involves elements of capitalism with humanism, science, and democracy in powerful visual language. Hu’s rhetoric participates in the pop-globalization wish for a more humane mode of capitalist convergence. As the Human Element converges, so also does it vary. Ever resistant to the formalizations of the periodic table, elemental humanness is unknowable yet also somehow globally understood. Hu eschews the old-

style corporate-capitalist rationalism of Big Science in favor of a transnationally localized ethical life, one that includes new kinds of quotidian embodiments and the implicit promise of global liberal freedom. The gorgeous diversity of Hu's settings suggests that elemental humanism will keep corporate science ethical by frustrating the wrong modes of globalization. Unlike a practico-inert McWorld, Hu is a humane existential certainty that "fearlessly" makes multicultural materialist globalism a virtual inevitability. The missing element of the periodic table – the human element - is also the ethico-political gap of globalization, and this will be gently, slowly, rightly *filled-in* with human-material stuff. Beneath the benevolent surface of transnational fearlessness, Hu also subtly puts Dow's rivals and critics on notice. Hu advances an aggressive claim for "global" corporate clout, finely garbed in sophisticated, expensive digital imagery. An image of something *materially* powerful, overwhelming to the eye, and obviously immense, Hu pushes an intimidating determinism that bonds Dow's fortunes to those of globalization, the human race, and the Earth as a whole.

Demotic ataraxy attempts to evoke something materially different. The atomist model of local materiality is non-determinist and non-finalist; it renders the stuff of the physical world *radically contingent* in its essential constitution, all the way down to a "quantum" existential level. It is also ontologically pluralistic, positing an *open multiplicity* of bodies, natures, and worlds, generated by the raining flux of material stuff. Epistemologically, local materiality is empiricist, but it is an empiricism that is frequently chastened by the material limits of time and space, as well as by a certain range of abstraction. This model of materiality is also attentive to the agency of things in combination with human life and action. It is ecologically attuned, not just to the organic

stuff of *life*, but to *things* too. “The human” is therefore not central or foundational to Lucretian materiality, and it certainly is far from being “elemental.” Yet Lucretian materialism is also profoundly ethical and in important respects political as well - generously, pragmatically, but also subversively and turbulently. Finally, these features of local atomism are interrelated through the Lucretian figure of “void.” Void is much more than empty space, but is rather space and place in combination with a certain mode, or sense, of sheer contingency, emergent possibility, and ethical and political involvement with things and their power.

Local materiality departs from commonplace conceptions of matter and void. Conventional materialism often figures “matter” as inert mass, concrete stuff that lies outside of human agency and ethical meaning “in itself,” all the while bearing the infinite and timeless immutable logic of natural laws. Matter is passive, mute stuff, there to be mastered, appropriated, and interpreted by the signature creativity of the human element. To whatever degree matter resists human control, it is figured as an external structure or a limit to ethics and politics. The commonplace view of void is similar. Void is usually understood either as a physical vacuum or as an existential limit to human life and meaning. Both physical and existential voids are figured negatively as something intolerable, obscene, or chaotic. Like Hu’s globalization, empty physical space is there to be instantly filled-up, on a pneumatic or hydrological analogy. In much the same way, it becomes the task of (teleological or existentialist) ethics to face down the voids of meaninglessness, suffering, and death, completing the lack somehow, conquering nothingness with being, filling existence with essence. By contrast, local materiality holds that *there is a void in things* – a void with which we can (and must) make our

ethical and political peace. Matter and void are good to think ontologically, ethically, and politically, largely because of their combined spacey/thing-ish resistance to law-like human conventions of technical mastery. Not all bodies under globalization or the large republic are lawfully or naturally filled-in. There is a void in and around things – a void that invites (and often demands) an expanded repertoire of political response for an ambulatory socio-material world.

Lucretius had good reason to worry that his materialism would be misread as an “ABCs” for “crime and godlessness.”¹¹¹ For centuries before and after Lucretius, “materialism,” variously construed, was dismissed as a metaphysical cover for greed, power politics, and violence.

Materialism has since lost some of its power to scandalize. Contemporary materialist ontologies have settled down, more or less comfortably, into philosophical and scientific commonplaces. No doubt this has had something to do with capitalism and its routine transformations of human material life. The fact that our human existence vitally depends upon godless social structures in play with physical nature has become an utterly ordinary assumption. If a century ago such a Promethean image of politics might have hinted at Marxism or Nietzscheanism, it is now a rote lesson innocuously taught to children in elementary schools across the world, particularly on Earth Day.

This chapter has drawn on Lucretius’ ABCs in order to elaborate an alternative conception of materialism. By way of summary, and in order to more clearly delineate the features of the local matter model, I will mark off some contrasts between it and these more dominant versions of modern materialism. I will then go on to suggest how the

¹¹¹ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 21.

local matter model can address the politics of capitalist globalization as a power that exceeds the large republic.

Commonplace materialism overstates the lawful character of material forms. It is haunted by the idea of mechanical or deterministic order, or by the teleological assumption of divine providence, or by the assumption of a rationally intelligible order of nature. If this assumption is made only heuristically, as with Kant, then matter (including human matter) becomes theorizable only to the extent that we can posit an as-if final cause to it (again, including us). The contrast with Lucretian local matter is obvious. In the local matter of *The Way of Things* we inhabit a cosmos where gods do not intervene in or design physical order and human life. There is no *telos* to this material world – what comes into being will pass away into *something* else, *somewhere* else, sooner or later. Physical laws, although powerful enough in their time and place, are fielded only as local and temporary affairs. They endure for a time in a particular place, but they too change. These changes are sometimes radically contingent in their modal character, their “way.” For matter sometimes *swerves*, at any given place and for no particular reason. Yet the swerve is not *ex nihilo*. “Nothing comes from nothing,” says Lucretius.¹¹² Void is not nothingness, but an energetic modal field that quickens matter to life. A local region of infinite void can loosely anticipate the impending motion of swerving and raining atoms; these movements are therefore not completed unheralded. Thus the queer physics of Lucretius evades any hard dichotomy between global flux and global determinism. The matter void dance of Lucretius *The Way of Things* locates material change in-between contingency and necessity, in open-ended, spatially shifting historical sequences. This is a theorizable world to a considerable but limited degree, despite the

¹¹² Ibid., 23.

fact that bodies *swerve* in void. Local matter argues for a style of empiricism that both puts a premium on physical sensation as the source of knowledge *and* tempers this truth-criterion with small-scale and long range limit-cases to our perception, such as bodies that are too small to feel or simulacra that lose atoms over particular distances in the course of their flight to our senses. Half of reality is void, after all, something that we “cannot touch,” which puts a variety of holes and gaps into the empiricist’s claims to know things, as Democritus and Lucretius insist.¹¹³

Local materialism is, then, also local voidism. Commonplace materialism figures void as a merely passive empty space, or else metaphysically denies *real emptiness* altogether: for nature abhors a vacuum, according to Aristotle. While Lucretian void is not nothing, it is sometimes uninhabited except insofar as it is the force of events-to-come. Unlike Newtonian space, void in local matter is neither in-itself a uniform passive topography nor an as-if vehicle for *ceteris paribus* assumptions about the in-principle universality and/or uniformity of physical laws. Variegated yet lacking in modularity, void is infinite and infinitely active, which is why teleologies of global convergence or global hypostases will be eventually subverted via self-organizing aleatory spatial rearrangements. Quickened to life here and there, things go elsewhere and become materially otherwise. Needless to say, Lucretian void is not the dreadful vacuum-like void imagined by certain strands of existentialism - a void to be faced, embraced, or traversed through leap-of-faith. For Lucretius, void *fields* existential pathos as well as ethical peace, but never augers dread for the future or the anticipatory terror of death – we are all half-void already in body and mind. Reflecting on that will keep us out of the unnatural, tyrannical grip of Religious Fear of Death. Precisely because *nature does not*

¹¹³ Ibid., 53.

abhor a vacuum, Lucretian ataraxy likewise does not contemplate void as a spiritual hollowness, a dark night of the soul, or deathly terror.

Local materialism does not place matter entirely to one side of a fact-value divide. Local matter varies, complicates, and blurs the ethics-matter relation. The many connections between ethical meaning and physical relations are indeed for Lucretius palpably obvious. Not everything that is material is ethical for Lucretius (who is no pantheist), but everything ethical is most certainly material. Ethical life begins for Lucretius with the right kind of contemplation of ourselves as transitory arrangements of matter and void. “Our matter, ourselves,” to vary another slogan of demotically embodied political reflexivity. The local materialist, as local matter him/herself, is ethically attentive to her or his various shifting relationships with other bodies, organic and otherwise, this to promote corporeal peace over pain and Fear as particular bodily arrangements in local void.

Local materialism is politically interested too, but advocates political solidarity with a *widened range of bodies*, stochastically, generously, and subversively, in and around given forms of political life. Local matter tends to be suspicious, even derisive in the mode of Democritean laughter, of the claims by *nomoi* to have settled the human/nature/matter relation. Local matter also laughs off *nomoi*’s ambitions for existential security via impermeable civic boundaries. For those walls will have holes in and around them, where a lot of important bodily political events are going to occur. Local materialism attends to those holes without trying to patch them up, just as science should attend to the ways in which the swerving generativity of the Earth sometimes breaks the causal conventions/laws of physics, geology, and biology. Matter swerves

bodies out of all such arrangements sooner or later, and that is why it is better to gather into the *nomos* family all the creatures that you can while keeping an extra two voids in play for all of those you cannot. This requires a demotic empiricism of ethical and political involvement with a widened modal range for human, animal, and inorganic bodies, drawn prudentially but generously without terror, bellicosity, or hubristic expansionism. Demotic empiricism proposes a movement-building void in-between the Democritean *nomos*-centered militancy of democratic state power and the haphazardly associational ethic of transnational cultivation favored by the Epicurean Garden, the better to politically anticipate the collisions of friends, enemies, and the many creatures who might swerve either way. There will be many occasions when this chancy politics does not work, but in a turbulent material world these loose arrays of demotic empirical solidarity may often be our best bet.

Large republican citizens under globalization face circumstances that are onto-politically analogous to the troubled turbulence confronted by the Greek and Roman atomists. Athens and Rome too faced dangerous questions involving trade, war, and the incorporation of outsiders, which forced their leaders and citizens to re-examine the stuff and scales of political life, via empire or republicanism or both, via openness or autarky or both. The atomists, including Democritus, addressed these questions with a demotically empiricist view toward equality, harmony, prosperity, and security, wherein the shifting boundaries and internal make-up of political life must be better *sensed* by citizens in order for their cities to endure. Neoliberals, economic nationalists, liberal cosmopolitans, isolationists, pluralists, secularist modernizers, socialists, ethnic separatists, feminists, radical democrats, and religious fundamentalists are today all

involving themselves in similar problems, as the increasing interdependence and complexity of global capitalism exercises enormous pressures upon their given conceptions of political life. The political question of capitalist globalization is to empirically assess just what kind of place your polity is turning into, how it materially relates to external bodies and forces, and how best to intervene within this new environment while still remaining, as neoliberal idiom puts it, “economically viable.”

The local matter model can also illuminate the ways in which capitalist globalization promotes something like “Religious Fear,” forms of contemporary social domination that depend upon an existentially inchoate attitude toward the future. Sometimes global capital’s Religious Fear really is quite obviously and straightforwardly religious (the political economy of oil in the Middle East, for example). Yet much of capitalism’s Religious Fear plays out more subtly. Although historically co-extensive with secular modernity, capitalism has always been an anxious secularism, even a convulsive one, as Max Weber argued. Capitalism has, from its historical origins on, exercised a dependence upon pre-modern religious traditions, especially Christian conceptions of time, virtue, and providence. The inability of capitalism to recognize its own inchoate distinctions between the secular and the sacred has often led it toward intensified circuits of *ressentiment*, frequently in concert with traditional religion’s failures to deal with kindred contradictions. The emergent result is often an assemblage of existential fury that keeps one tendril in Mammon and another in God. William Connolly has called this kind of body an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine,” citing the existential imbrications of the Republican economic and political right-wings in

the US during the most recent Bush Administration.¹¹⁴ Capitalist dread toward the future comes in many different guises, which produce many different emergent modes of social domination. Much of this dread, however, depends upon global capitalism's air of objectivity, totality, and inevitability, reinforced through the raining simulacra of advertising, professionalized political rhetoric, and the formal, technical policy prescriptions of mainstream economics. There is, in other words, a decided *lack of void* in neo-liberalism's most persistent public imagery.

Dow Chemical's The Human Element is a good example of this. Hu's imagery captures beautifully, in lush colors and textures, the felt material sense that global capitalism is changing our local material environments. The video's narrative then shrewdly appropriates this sense to an argument for globalization as a world-historical inevitability. By nominating itself and neoliberalism in general as the global *telos* for "the human," Dow Chemical positions itself as a sovereign power of creativity, diversity, and prosperity in a moment of civilization-scaled economic transformation. For the spaces of the Earth are filling-up, and the Human Element, via ethical science and enlightened capitalism, is finally coming into its own. There is something intimidating about both the video's cynicism and its impressive capacity to produce a work of genuine digital beauty and social vision in the service of its corporate image. This too, in its way, is a bid for Religious Fear, very much in line with the Mars-like bellicosity that Lucretius worried would inflame the Roman Republic beyond all proportionality and reason. That such visual rhetoric is quite routine for the image advertising of transnational corporations only multiplies its effectiveness in keeping a certain teleological image of

¹¹⁴ William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2008) 39-45.

capitalism operative in the public sphere. Against this image of capitalism – organically and inevitably cohering, convergent, and benevolent - the local matter model argues that there is a void in capitalism, which demands a wider range of empirical knowledge and political response.

The void in and around large republican capitalism requires that capitalism's failures be exposed and demystified, including its failures to meet vital human needs and its failures to promote equality and freedom. This remains an important critical function for social scientific work on capitalism, as it has been for almost two centuries. There is more to the theorization of capital's void than this, however. Capitalism's void also requires that a closer empirical attention be given to the constitutive bodies that generate and reproduce capital, which bodies go far beyond states, markets, and corporations as the primary units of analysis. Capital's void also requires that both critics and supporters of capitalism resist the habit of positing to global capitalism a *telos* of convergence or stable law-like equilibrium, which assumptions tend to govern most thinking in political economy. This also means that political economy must revise significantly the metaphor of "globalization," with its explicit conception of a unified totality within which capital will emerge to operate at a steady state, "all things being equal." The void in and around capitalism is rearranging locally as well as globally, with social logics for capitalist divergence that are at least as powerful as the more obvious pressures for convergence. To miss these local spaces produced by global capitalism, as both globalization's celebrants and opponents frequently do, is to misunderstand radically the political openings and constraints within which citizens of globalization must operate. The void in globalization quickens new bodies to life, which fact suggests that the large republic's

denizens must cultivate a more palpable political sense for the growing, changing, raining range of bodies within which they live.

Chapter Two: Marx's Matter: Capital, Value, and Void

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2.0: Introduction

In Federalist 10 James Madison worries that factions, wrongly territorialized into republics that are too small, tend to pursue economically "wicked project[s]:" "[a] rage for paper money," "the abolition of debts," "the equal distribution of property."¹¹⁵ What is wicked about such projects is that they distort the naturally unequal workings of human "faculties," reason chief among them, and therefore interfere with the just creation of property in all its various forms and distributions. Factions, usually of the propertyless, want to make equal that which is by nature always unequal. In doing so they destroy popular government through the pursuit of what is unnatural, unjust, and impossible.

The Task Force report, by contrast, argues for greater distributive justice precisely through broadened civic mobilizations, achieved however improbably within the constraints of the large republican design. The report argues that political science needs critical studies of democratic life that are guided by the normative aim of a more equal

¹¹⁵ James Madison, "Federalist 10," 128.

distribution of property (“income” or “wealth” in the report’s parlance.) Very wealthy individuals, large corporations, and their factious apparatuses are generally the culprits here; they make unequal that which can and ought to be equal.

The report also argues that future “critical studies of democratic life” should return to what it calls “macro” theorizing about the broader relationships between government and “society,” as exemplified by Marxism, systems-theory, critical engagements with liberal pluralism, and Weberianism.¹¹⁶ The report suggests that macro theories, as opposed to the “micro” foci of behaviorist political science, are better at understanding the interaction between “society” and government. “Societal conditions do not simply represent ‘the environment’ – an input into the black box of governance that is converted into policy. The reality is that society and government influence and limit each other; each is an environment to the other.”¹¹⁷ Macro theories are also better at understanding long chunks of historical time, both in disentangling complex causal relationships between social and governmental processes and in revealing common implications of causally unrelated processes.¹¹⁸ A return to macro theories like Marxism might help to correct behaviorism’s biases toward “very specialized, atemporal studies,” this despite the dangers of hyper-abstraction that attend such “large scale” critiques of society.¹¹⁹

This chapter will think about large republican capitalist globalization using Karl Marx’s critique of the capitalist value-form in concert with Lucretius’ demotic materialism. I will argue that the capitalist value-form is a power that surpasses the

¹¹⁶ Jacobs and Skocpol ed., *Inequality and American Democracy*, 229.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 229-230.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 228.

ability of the large republic to divide and conquer it. Capital also makes the normative specification of socioeconomic equality extremely problematic. This is in part because of its impersonal social character and its large scales, but also it is also because of capitalism's peculiar microphysics, its voids, and its ability to gather and code physical bodies into new arrangements. Marx's critique of capital, then, is only very imperfectly understood as a "macro theory" if "macro" refers only to large scales. Marx's critique of value is indeed a theory of long time scales too, and their complexity, but for Marx temporality in itself is also understood critically, as an emergent mode of domination, violence, and unearthly privation that purports to be secular modern progress. In this respect capitalist relative surplus value production is in fact the kind of thing that Madison was so worried about: an ongoing, factious division and re-division of property that alienates citizens from each other and from nature by making unreal logics of equivalence, between labor and labor-power, between work and wages, between wealth and value. Marx's critique of capital is, as the report worries, sometimes very abstract. But this is partially because Marx undertakes a critique of something, "abstract labor," that *uses abstraction* to conceal itself. In demystifying such abstractions, Marx makes use of something like Lucretius' demotic empiricism, rather than "abstract" "macro theory" as such, one that appeals to sight and touch and sometimes sound. Marx's critical empiricism seeks out the wider range of bodies in and around capitalist social forms, the voids in what purports to rock solid concrete, and the conventional violences that falsely promise human flourishing. Denizens of the large republic, one bound up in even larger capitalist dynamics for the foreseeable future, likewise need ways of thinking and feeling

capitalist value as a globalizing power in the present moment. Lucretius' demotic materialism, put into conversation with Marx's value critique, can help with all of this.

This chapter pursues Marx's critique of capital through a long critical reading of his response to another report on democracy and inequality, the so-called "Gotha Program" put forward by German social democrats in 1875. The chapter will also closely read certain select moments in Marx's account of the value-form in *Capital*. The aim of these long close readings is to draw attention to the microphysics of Marx's critique of capital, the fine-grain of his theory's materialism, and to rethink their political meanings for Marx and for us. Brevity and analytical summary would be misleading here, just as it would have been for a political interpretation of Lucretius. Both Marx and Lucretius give extraordinary attention to their use of language in their work. This in partly because Marx wanted his readers to think and feel a certain way about capitalist forms precisely as material things and spaces, much as Lucretius wanted his readers to think and feel a certain way about life and death in Roman politics. This chapter will attempt to honor that care in Marx's case just as the previous chapter did for Lucretius. It will therefore focus at length on Marx's writing on nineteenth century Prussia and Britain in the hope that readers in and around the twenty first century United States will be able to recognize something of themselves in both settings.

In the first section, I will undertake to critically evoke and reconstruct Marx's theory of value, focusing on its materialities and the politics that follow from them. I will draw on Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" and select moments from *Capital*.¹²⁰ I will then in the next section try to put Marx's critical conception of value into

¹²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage 1992). Karl Marx, "The Critique of the Gotha Program," in *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (Norton: New York) 525.

conversation with Lucretius' local materialism, with the aim of revising Marx's dialectical finalism with Lucretius' swerves and void, Democritean egalitarian militancy, and Epicurean generosity and ataraxy. The concluding section will offer some reflections on what this combination of Marxian value critique and Lucretian physics might mean for a large republic that finds itself amidst the still larger forces of capitalist globalization and global warming.

2.1: "Material Etc., Conditions:" The Political Materiality of Marx's Value-Form

This section will set out Marx's materialist conception of value, or "the value-form." Capitalist value is a dynamic, open material relation between people, organic nature, inorganic things, and an emergent physical order of time. These relations self-organize into a powerful kind of "abstract" social objectivity that is fielded "concretely" as a particular mode of continuous wealth-production. The shifting material stuff of this social objectivity is itself incomplete and potentially - but not always or ultimately - self-subverting. The stuff of valorization is also an ethical and political state of affairs, one that continuously restructures, for now, the possibilities for human worth and human equality. This section will focus on the peculiar *abstract materiality* of capitalist valorization, drawing on Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" and *Capital*.

2.1 (a): Labor, Value, and Demotic Political Sense in "The Critique of the Gotha Program"

Marx's most explicitly political statements on the materiality of the value-form are found in the 1875 "Critique of the Gotha Program." Marx was scathing in his

response to the German socialists' drafted unification statement. The draft was adopted anyway, thanks mainly to the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle.¹²¹ Marx's failure to swerve the party politics of Germany's nascent social democracy with this small intervention was unfortunate but unsurprising. Nonetheless, his critical marginal notes on the draft anticipated some of the most important stumbling-blocks to twentieth century socialism, particularly socialism's productivist biases (the equation of social progress with "economic growth") as well as its conflicted conceptions of political agency, democracy, the state, religion, and the workings of culture. Here Marx argues, presciently, that politics in and around the capitalist value-form is a materially complex affair that must be negotiated with a careful empirical involvement with a much wider range of socio-economic formations. It is precisely this *wider field of bodies and spaces*, which goes far beyond private property, prices, markets, wealth, wages, and "labor," that went overlooked first by the Lassalleans and then later by various twentieth century socialisms too, including many "Marxist" ones.

It is easy to see why the Lassalleans' Gotha Program at first glance might seem Marxist. Take, for example, their historical materialist-like idea that labor is "the source of all wealth and all culture, and since useful labor is only possible in society and through society, the undiminished proceeds of labor belong with equal right to all members of society."¹²² Marx rejects the Lassalleans' labor theory of value, and rejects also the idea that all labor is somehow "social." "Labor is *not* the source of all wealth," argues Marx.¹²³ *Nature* is just as productive of wealth as human labor. Wealth consists of use-values, the sensuous satisfaction of human wants of whatever sort. Use-values can be

¹²¹ Marx, "The Critique of the Gotha Program," 525.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

created by the labor of isolated individuals as well as by societies, and they can also be *freely given* to humans by natural things that are untouched by human labor. Use-value, then, is only half anthropocentric. Use-value is better understood as an encounter between humans and non-human life and inorganic matter, one that fulfills a human want of some kind but that need not be produced by human action at all. Moreover, use-value is not *value*, according to the terminology that Marx develops in *Capital*, and neither is value wealth. Value, however, is a distinctly socio-historical, human-made thing, a capitalist index of commodities' worth as measured by an abstract standard of labor-time, that is, how much average labor-time is congealed in the commodity. More specifically, in Marx's terms, value is exchange-value universalized as "socially necessary abstract labor time," to which formulation's details we will return later. For now let us simply note that Marx begins his critique of the Lassalleans by *demoting labor's wealth production away from a lofty ontological premise of human or social mastery and into a messier empirical participation in the nonhuman worlds of animals, natural environments, and things*. The problem with the anthropocentric theory of wealth of the Lassalleans is that it at once elevates human labor arbitrarily as the sole wealth producer while also cutting human labor off from its contact with the sensuous world of nature and things, which is a result of confusing wealth (use-values) with value.

Marx goes on to argue that workers do *not* have the right to the "undiminished" proceeds of their labor, and neither does "society" have the right to appropriate workers' labor-power as it pleases, "equal rights" or no.¹²⁴ The idea that workers do have such a right to the full measure of their labor's products begs obvious questions. Do the workers own the whole of the final product, or just its equivalent in value, or just the quantum of

¹²⁴ Ibid., 526.

value that their individual efforts in the complex division of labor added to it? It also begs other questions of distribution, including administrative costs and welfare-state provisions (pensions, health care, and education etc.). Wealth redistribution that goes entirely to the *immediate* producers (however “immediate production” is defined) does not make any sense, Marx argues, given the complex and overwhelmingly *mediated* character of the capitalist division of labor and the absolute dependence of all of society’s needs upon this form of wealth-production as well. This version of the labor theory of value is in fact deeply suspect, for it no doubt conceals some other class interests behind its fanciful model of an ownership of immediate producers. Equally suspect, however, is the notion that “society” owns the totality of wealth, and thereby may rightfully redistribute it according to this or that principle of justice, efficiency, etc. Such a redistributive politics, Marx charges, is not socialist but bourgeois, because it begs the deeper question of *production* and the lived, creative struggles of the workers themselves at the point of production, who are best understood as precisely labor-power alienated from labor, that is, the means of production. The Lassalleans’ redistributive justice ends up blinded to the deeply contested politics of productive relations and forces. Marx argues here that the “hollow” concept of “society,” as rendered by the Lassalleans’ draft, becomes far too vague and malleable a notion, one that is also accompanied by an entirely misplaced emphasis on wealth and its distribution.¹²⁵ This ambiguity too will be readily deployed to conceal bourgeois or neo-feudal or whatever other exploitative interests, which obfuscation has in fact been among the main tasks of modern political economy hitherto.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 527.

What the program should have said, Marx argues, is that labor becomes the source of capitalist wealth and culture only when it emerges as modern “social labor,” this through the complex reorganization of the division of labor and the routine transformations of the labor process by advanced technology structured by bourgeois ownership and market competition.¹²⁶ Social labor’s creation of “wealth” and “culture” is the result of an alienating and exploitative dialectic. The Lassalleans’ high-minded praise of “labor” and “society” leaves this alienated and exploitative dialectic intact by refusing to think it in its historical specificity, which is, in Marx’s terms, “value” or the “value-form.” Yet, to merely give “social labor” the moral credit for capitalist wealth production does not so much *demystify* bourgeois conceptions of wealth as *express* and *affirm* them, for the bourgeois economists have a point when they claim that bourgeois property relations are under capitalism (as it operates in the here and now of 1875) essential to labor’s wealth-production too.¹²⁷ Bourgeois private property’s perverse involvement with labor’s productivity of wealth and culture is no mere illusory appearance; it is under capitalism a (transitory) law of social development and a palpable fact of everyday capitalist life. The bourgeoisie’s opponents must instead direct their attention to the question of the value-form, which is the set of human, natural, and physical relationships that mutually constitute “labor” and “society” in such a way as to create *between and through them* a particular material logic of wealth-production, “capitalism.” Value, then, is itself not wealth, nature, price, labor, or society in general; it is rather the specifically capitalist social organization of labor-power, the labor process, and the stuff upon which labor works, including machines, raw materials, and natural resources. Contrary to the

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 528.

Lassalleans, socialism will not finally “realize” the “full value” of labor or return that “full value” by way of “equal right” to society as a whole. Marx argues that capitalism already does this, and indeed does so more or less fairly at that, given the local logic of capitalist value.¹²⁸ What socialism will do is transcend the value-form itself, as the locally material logic of capitalist production.

Marx gives some hints as to what this might look like when he describes communism as “the cooperative society based on common ownership of the means of production.”¹²⁹ Given cooperation based on common ownership, “producers will not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the products appear here *as the value* of these products [emphasis in the original], as a *material quality possessed by them* [emphasis added]” since such labor will appear as a part of total social labor.¹³⁰ The end of the value-form will not mean an end to labor’s use-value or wealth-production, to be sure, but it will mean that labor’s products will be appear as what they are, the stuff of immediate production *and* social production, living *and* accumulated (“dead”) labor, human-made *and* natural wealth, all without the distorting inversions and projections of commodity fetishism, the conceits of bourgeois domination, or the value-form’s eerie and brutal mediation of labor-power and labor. When we recall that social labor – including human labor-power - is itself the product of past labor too, the overcoming the value-form also means that labor’s essence will undergo a radical shift along with its form of appearance. In-common, cooperative labor will *not* be subsumed under “society,” and neither will it be freshly congealed into a more “egalitarian” commodity fetish. Neither will social labor be arbitrarily reified through the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 529.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

productivism of a one-sided industrial form, such as giving factory workers their “just due” for the value-added to their work, since both the factory and the workers’ labor-power are themselves products of various past and present labor and other forms of wealth. Socialism, then, must go far beyond the self-actualization of industrial labor via economic redistribution post-production. Neither, obviously, would socialism reduce all of human experience to the depraved condition of being the mere bearer of raw labor-power. Labor and wealth post-value-form will become more palpably real, more just, more social and more individualistic, more *human*, precisely through the *re-organization of production itself* according to some other socio-material logic, this quite apart from the redistributive justice of welfare-states, state ownership, or economic planning. For the first time in history, Marx argues, “the material, etc., conditions” exist for human beings to rid themselves of the “curse” of the value-form, wherein social labor takes the guise of an inhuman objectivity of “abstract” and “necessary” labor-time.¹³¹ Wealth, work, labor, technology, and individual and social wants and needs will be measured and arranged by material logics far richer and more varied in their range of possibility than the capitalist equivalences of money, private profit, and abstract labor-time.

Even as Marx reasserts his more radical vision against the Lassalleans’ watered-down socialism, he also counsels prudence and compromise, and worries over politics. The “Critique of the Gotha Program” stands apart from many of Marx’s better known writings in its ambivalent, skeptical attitude toward the near- and middle-range prospects – let alone the historical inevitability - for the value-form’s overcoming. Here capitalist valorization is not figured as something that is overripe for dialectical negation through economic crisis or revolutionary class struggle. Socialism here is a “material, etc.”

¹³¹ Ibid., 529.

“condition,” with its own open logic, not a dialectically guaranteed necessity. If this emergent possibility is beginning to take shape, its realization is also still quite remote in the capitalism of the German Empire of 1875. This is in part because for now capital and labor do not here confront each other as cleanly divided antagonists in a well-ordered contradiction between thesis and antithesis. For again living human labor-power is also itself alienated from labor (the labor process and the means of production) as well as from capital and wealth, just as the bourgeoisie are themselves, however grotesquely, a part of capitalism’s labor too. Marx does not suggest here that these mutual saturations between the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, capital, labor, and human labor-power will sort themselves out anytime soon. These messy, weird inter-relations are the immediate material logic of capitalist value itself, and they for now resist dialectical ordering via determinate negation. Needless to say, the Lassalleans’ own draft falls well short of socialist *aufhebung* too. Marx’s attitude toward class struggle in the new German Empire of 1875 is circumspect and deflated, with little of the soaring triumphalism of the “Manifesto” nearly thirty years before.¹³² Marx’s socialism, and his felt sense of working-class militancy and solidarity, is sustained in these notes only as a sobered, chastened, anxious politics, even as he defends the conceptual terms of his own critique against the Lassalleans’ distortions and opportunism. Marx does not regard socialism as an around-the-corner inevitability, and neither does he assure his readers that they can count upon the long-run teleology of socio-historical lawfulness to rescue socialists from their little mistakes in the political here and now. Because Marx does not think that the Lassalleans’ mendacities and blunders will just melt away harmlessly in the rising

¹³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker 469.

historical tide, he is adamant that they be exposed. For as dialectically contradictory as the value-form may be, we might say that there is also a *void* in valorization too, an open space for “material etc.” continuity and change that is not governed by an immanent historicist *telos*. In Lucretian terms, this space is the open, quickening void within and around the palpable stuff of capitalist valorization. Marx argues that the German socialists must learn to encounter this open material field in all of its variety, chanciness, and local particularities, all of which fall into special conjunctures in and around Bismarck’s newly emerged Prussian empire.

The Lassalleans imagine that they are making capitalism’s maldistributed body more palpable to the workers by proclaiming the foundation of all wealth and culture to be “labor” and/or “society.” They thereby end up with a false image of capitalist matter that is, as Lucretius says of stoic physics, too “tightly packed,” too fixed, too static. They overlook the *broader range of bodies* that constitute capitalism’s inner dynamics of valorization, missing as well the *abstract modal spaces* of valorization through which these bodies maneuver, combine, and grow. Mistaking the more abstract spaces of value production for the more concrete stuff of wealth distribution, Lassalleian socialism itself becomes ideologically vacuous, its program an inchoate list of proposals that will at best only rearrange the matter of the capitalist value-form rather than transcend it. Marx’s critique of the Gotha Program might be usefully understood, in Lucretian terms, as urging socialism toward a closer, subtler physical attention to the things and modal spaces of Prussian valorization, including the empirically felt stuff of the imperial state, civil society, feudalistic Junker agriculture, religion, and human labor-power’s material life. This broadened materialist range of capitalist valorization yields a different image of

socialism too, which might be described as a demotically “local” socialism, one that carefully maintains a healthy void from the Prussian state apparatus. Marx here recommends, for now, a quiet socialist gradualism for Germany, one that combines parliamentary party-building with a strengthened labor movement, worker-owned cooperative industries, more militant and courageous criticism of culture and religion, more principled “liberal” commitments to civil rights, and finally, a cautious attitude toward the still distant prospects for the Prussian state’s fuller democratization. To get a better sense of Marx’s proposed demotic void in and around the Prussian value-form, it may be helpful to consider in more detail the constituent bodies that Marx believes to be in play.

In order for the German workers of 1875 to systematically underestimate the value of their labor-power on the factory floor, and thus produce surplus-value’s active, open void between wages and work, a number of other bodies besides workers and capitalists must be linked and arranged in a wider material field. The Lassalleans’ theoretically erase this wider material field in favor of the narrower modal range of “immediate production” – wage levels, profits, prices. Two bodies in particular go unmentioned in the draft: the Junkers and the Prussian state apparatus. Marx directs German workers’ empirical attention to the very earth upon which their factories stand, land still owned by the entrenched old Junker nobility rather than by the embryonic German bourgeoisie. The Prussian Junker class persists as an admixture of feudal aristocracy and modernizing capitalist plantation owners. They are not being swept away by industrialism; on the contrary, they show every sign of reconsolidating their power and wealth in Bismarck’s new order. Materially connected to the Junkers’ enduring class

cohesion is the Prussian state apparatus itself, newly charged with imperial energies in the aftermath of Bismarck's triumph in the Franco-Prussian War and his incorporation of the other German states. Bourgeois revolution is nowhere on the horizon. Instead, both the body of the state apparatus – including the bureaucracy, the police, and the army – and the stuff of the landed Prussian nobility are mixing into the value-creation of German capitalism, even as each body shifts its gravity in response to the other as well as to the bourgeoisie, the workers, the peasantry, foreign states, the world market, and rapid technological change. Marx charges that the Lassalleans selectively overlook these distinctly Prussian valorizing bodies in order to launch a opportunistic parliamentary body of their own, one that will accommodate Junker authoritarianism and help to smooth out its rapprochement with the industrial bourgeoisie, all the while deploying an airy rhetoric of “fair wages” and “normal working hours.”¹³³

In a strangely inept mix of hyperbole and cynicism, the Lassalleans' draft obfuscates the local materiality of Prussian valorization by *exaggerating* the bodily political power of the proletariat. The Lassalleans proclaim the workers to be the only truly progressive class in Germany, a mighty demos on the cusp on state power. All other classes are a single “reactionary mass.”¹³⁴ Marx rejects this image of the German proletariat of 1875 as a fantasy, pointing out that most Germans are still peasants and that the socialist workers will still need many peasant (and petit-bourgeois) votes in order win seats in the lower parliament. The interstitial voids of Germany's class-structure and class-formations cannot be filled-in by an empty rhetoric of proletarian hegemony, given the obvious fact that the material conditions for that hegemony simply are not yet

¹³³ “The Critique of the Gotha Program” 540-541.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 532.

imminent. The proletariat's class-formation and its political expressions demand a slower, subtler, and friendlier empirical approach toward other classes, one that does not publicly dismiss them as a one big cancerous lump.¹³⁵ Like Epicurus, Marx suggests a prudential voidal politics of coalition-building, where the German proletarian minority might confront its enemies by gathering into one socialism all the workers and peasants that it can, with a sustained openness toward ambiguous outsiders in the middle classes, and an active remove toward Junker imperialism. Keeping the Junker class and Bismarck's state apparatus at arms length will not be easy to do. Marx concedes that the present circumstances demand caution. But the Lassallean draft's facile talk of imminent democracy suggests a toxic eagerness to be materially incorporated into the Bismarckian state's authoritarian parliamentary façade as a weak junior partner. The draft's reform proposals should be read against the poisonous, cloudy context of this statist and authoritarian atmosphere. The draft calls for "state" ownership of workers' cooperatives and for the "state" provision of elementary education.¹³⁶ Marx attacks these proposals as imperializing, despite their progressive, democratic, and socialist veneer. Marx argues that the worker coops and public schools should be kept as far as possible from the tentacles of Bismarck's empire and Prussian valorization generally. He finally charges the Lassalleans with cultivating a vacuous liberal idealism that masks their willful complicity with a rapidly consolidating capitalist police state. The answer for now is not revolutionary militancy, for the revolution is not nigh, and the present material circumstances will not pass away overnight. Although Marx agrees with the Lassalleans' unspoken judgment that now is not the time to demand a full-blown German democratic

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 540-541.

republic, Marx argues instead that a new political space must be cultivated between classes and beneath and around the Prussian state apparatus, Junker hegemony, and the queer capitalist/feudal hybrid of German value-production.¹³⁷ This space will resist and evade incorporation into the feudal-bourgeois admixture of the Prussian value-form by widening the empirical, bodily range of socialist politics. Again, this is not a question of merely waiting for industrialism to work its world-historical magic, or for the dialectics of economic collapse or imperial overreach to open the doors to revolution. Marx derides the Lassalleans' naiveté in supposing that a new society can be built in the same way a state builds a railroad.¹³⁸ The materiality of the Prussian value-form is an ethical and political state of affairs as well as a socioeconomic one, and the German socialists' struggle for equality demands a gradual series of active and prudent interventions within Prussian capital's constitutive bodies, as they shift and rearrange through local spaces in the near and middle-range.

Marx's critique of the Gotha Program advances an anti-teleological politics that stands in stark contrast to the "Manifesto" and other writings. Although Marx does not use here the Epicurean vocabulary of matter and void, he does argue in these critical notes a position that is strikingly similar to Lucretius' demotic empiricism. Bismarck's Prussia will not just *fall* into socialism. This is in part because the politics of this conjuncture is for now *materially underdetermined*. There are likewise several pathways available to German capitalism, and therefore German socialism, depending largely upon the political arrangement of its constitutive classes and other bodies, such as religion, schools, nature, and the state. The Lassalleans are swerving the workers movement into

¹³⁷ Ibid., 538.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 530.

Bismarck's Empire, which is itself an aleatory conjuncture of Junker/Prussian capitalism, militarism, nationalism, and expansionism, one with an uncertain destiny and life-span. Marx also shares Lucretius' concern with keeping multiple voids in play between an expanded range of political bodies, the better to generate broader possibilities for action. This means creating a closer space for material encounters between workers, peasants, and the petit-bourgeoisie while maintaining a much longer distance between the workers and the Junkers' state. Marx charges that the Lassalleans' failure to maneuver these bodies in multiple voids will play into Bismarck's hands, making of socialist "equality" a grotesque accommodation of neo-feudalism and emerging capitalism.

The Lassalleans' draft represents a multiply compounded failure of political sense, a failure to *think* as well as a failure to *feel* Prussian valorization, a failure of abstract theoretical sense and sensuous demotic empirical common sense. There is something unreal and cynical about their breathless expectations for the imminent arrival of universal suffrage and state-run workers' coops. These socialists have no felt connection to the emerging way of things in Bismarck's capitalism. This lack of sense is in part very much about the concrete: the bloody militarism of the Prussian state, the Junker-owned land beneath their feet, the overwhelming bodily numbers (and voices and votes) of the German peasantry, and the obscene quotidian violence of the factory that the draft leaves untouched, *inter alia*. In other ways, however, this lack of sense is also paradoxically about the more abstract stuff of capitalism, the spaces of the value-form that cannot be touched, as Lucretius says of void.¹³⁹ The next section will briefly elaborate upon how Marx thought of value and relative surplus value production as constituting the materiality of labor as value under capitalism.

¹³⁹ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 30.

2.1 (b): The Materiality of the Value-Form in *Capital*

Marx begins *Capital* by observing that capitalist economies seem to be nothing more than an “ ‘immense collection of commodities,’ ” a voluminous bunch of stuff that is bought and sold.¹⁴⁰ Capitalism is much more than this, however. The Lassalleans see this immense collection and propose to redistribute it “equally,” giving it over to the workers or to society as a whole. To only decommodify this collection of stuff through state ownership or higher minimum wages, however, is to leave the ongoing, open material logic of capitalist production intact. To get at this material logic, Marx undertakes a critical phenomenological analysis of the commodity. This immense collection of commodities only seems to be a strictly sensuous physical relationship between things; it is in fact a broader socio-material relationship between people, things, and the Earth. This thing-like social mediation between people and nature is the value-form or valorization. The commodity-form depends upon the value-form, but the value-form can persist in a world where commodification is attenuated by welfare-states, say, or even replaced by state ownership, so long as labor remains “value” and human bodies “labor-power.” Free markets and private property are contingent rather than essential features of capitalist production.

A commodity is something bought and sold according to its value. What is value? What we call the value of a commodity is variously understood in the capitalist world as either use-value or exchange-value.¹⁴¹ Marx reserves the term “value” for

¹⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 126.

exchange-value, so that things have both use-value and value. If the immense collection of commodities were composed of only use-values (wealth), then capitalism's stuff would consist entirely of distinct things corresponding to distinct human wants. The physical particularities of things and wants - some artificial, others natural – would in each case stand in an arbitrary and incommensurable relation to all of the others. Absent some material logic of equivalence between different things, no concrete thing's use-value could be measured by any other. With such a collection of things there would be wealth but no material basis for exchange, no possible logic for regular intercourse among this immense collection of useful stuff. Capitalism's things are *commodities* only by virtue of being bought and sold, which is to say in Marx's terms that they *circulate*. This immense collection of stuff is *in motion*; it is nothing like an inert stockpile of treasure. Capitalism's commodities are priced to move, as it were, priced so that they may materially create, occupy, and rearrange space. In Lucretius' terms, commodities are priced to void.

How do different things and wants become abstractly equivalent so that they may be exchanged so vigorously upon the concrete surface life of capitalism? Marx playfully experiments with different logics of equivalence, wherein commodities are equated two at a time, in infinite chains, and where all commodities are indexed to one in particular.¹⁴² His analyses are at turns solemnly algebraic and comically absurd, as commodities' material essences are seemingly expressed, articulated, transferred, reflected back unto themselves, and made to act, talk, and suffer existential crises. Muckish physical banality is at play with high phenomenological drama in these serious yet satiric mini-critiques, as Marx's logical search for a common valorizing substance puts *mere things* into

¹⁴² Ibid., 138-163.

preposterous dialectical encounters amongst themselves. Following Aristotle, Marx asks, how many shoes equal the value of a house? Which substance's value is being expressed here? Is it the abstracted shoe-ness of the house that is being expressed in the mortgage papers, or is it rather that my worn-out boots require a transfusion of house-ness from the cobbler? Why not go to a carpenter to fix my boots? Who will triumph in the master-slave dialectic between...finished coats and raw linen? As palpable examples like beds, houses, and shoes are arrayed in varying equations and proportions, Marx renders the universal form of value as an *elusive form of appearance and consciousness* that is somehow also an *open-ended physical state of affairs*, a "form" of value that is absurd, ghoulish, neither entirely real nor imaginary, both human and inhuman, a physically operative "phantom objectivity." (The commodity fetish, then, is much more than an arbitrary superstition, and Marx insists that the mere act of demystifying it does little to diminish its power as a socio-physical force.)¹⁴³ Marx makes it impossible for us to think of the "equal redistribution of wealth" in the anything like the conventional way by logically problematizing the very *materiality* of exchange-value's abstractions, the stuff of its "identity" and "equality," this again in distinction from the empirically ordinary, sensuous stuff of use-value/wealth.

By the time this strange phenomenological admixture of gothic horror-show and low-brow slapstick gets around to naming *labor* as the universal equivalent, it should be clear that this categorical distinction is hardly an honor. The labor of the value-form is no yeoman virtue. Neither does Marx argue the point with any particular force. He merely mentions labor as being the only thing left that might fit the bill. His phrasing and tone are strangely cavalier in this crucial existential moment of his analysis, as though labor's

¹⁴³ Ibid., page 168.

universal equivalence could be more or less plausibly suggested with a mere “why not?,” or perhaps a shrug of the shoulders at the belated recognition of the obvious.¹⁴⁴ In any case, this quiet assertion of the universality of labor does not sound at all like the thunderous declaration of “Working Men of All Countries Unite!” that concludes the “Manifesto.”¹⁴⁵ The difference is more than rhetorical. Labor as the universal equivalent for exchange-value is very different from the revolutionary proletariat as the universal class; it is a labor that is *internal to the capitalist value-form*, phenomenologically and materially. The ontological privilege enjoyed by labor here is still imbricated within an absurdist phenomenology of commodity fetishism; it does not unravel or explode this ghastly comedy but rather ties it together, inhabiting and sustaining its quasi-reality modally and physically. The labor that grounds the material possibility for capitalist exchange-value is nothing so simple as a rational human kernel in a husk of economic psychosis, but is more ambiguously halfway between illusion and reason, the abstract and the concrete, essence and appearance, dead matter and living human meaning, tragically suffering subject and inert thing-like object.

This is alienated labor, to be sure, wrenched from individual living human beings, but it is alienated labor that has been aggregated from a great many human bodies and processed into an abstract corporeal homogeneous mass. The universal equivalent is labor’s exchange-value as *socially necessary abstract labor time*. “Abstract labor” is a body of labor that is commensurable across many otherwise divergent production processes. Like any other commodity’s use-value, labor’s use-value is particular to the demands of a specific set of concrete activities – the labor of the cobbler is not the labor

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁴⁵ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 500.

of the carpenter. A general form, “abstract labor,” allows the cobbler and the carpenter to participate in routine exchanges within the same unruly material universe. Abstract labor is partly a symbolic or ideological convention (like Democritus’ *nomos*), but it is also bodily stuff (like Democritean matter). Marx describes abstract labor in physical terms as a flowing, congealing, coagulating organic mass, fluidic yet dense and sticky, like fat or blood. This abstract body inhabits a shifting modal array of possibility, “socially necessary labor time,” that fields the trajectories of its motion and growth. The value of a commodity is the abstract labor congealed within it, but this labor must be of a certain measurable quality if it is to count as having value. This quality consists in prevailing “social” standards for productive competence that are expressed as discrete units of time, for example, “man hours” or “work weeks.” (Otherwise, an incompetent producer whose work took three times longer than the prevailing average would produce a commodity that is three times more valuable precisely in perverse proportion to his incompetence.) A commodity is a bearer of value only if the labor congealed within it meets the “necessity” of this average time standard, which might be understood as abstract labor’s supporting background conditions or perhaps its ecological modal niche, the “way” of its things. The “social necessity” of labor time is a transitory measure that is entirely local to a particular time and place, involving a very wide material range of cultural and political elements besides “economic” and “technological” ones. A given array of socially necessary abstract labor time will self-transform out of its time and place over the course of capitalist valorization, thanks to these wider social conditions in combination with technological change, supply and demand, and most fundamentally, surplus-value production.

The immense collection of commodities circulates but also grows, develops, and expands its range of motion, what Lucretius would call its local void. The value-*form* is in fact a process of open, ongoing value-*formation*, or valorization. Valorization is a particular trajectory of productive growth. The generative source of this growth is the way in which human labor-power is routinely bought and sold for less than its value. The worker produces more value than the value congealed in her wages, where again value is socially necessary abstract labor time. Oblivious to this complex, subtle, and utterly intangible deceit of capitalist time, the worker thinks that she is being paid her work's temporal value in wages, a false equation likely spelled out in precise detail in her work-contract or pay-stub, "x dollars for y hours worked." The contract conceals the fact that her workday goes significantly longer than the labor-time value of her wages. The abstract and material stuff of the extra time goes to her employer, the smaller part of which is pocketed as profits while the greater part is reinvested back into labor-devaluing production processes, rendering the exploitation more efficient and lucrative, thus diminishing the exchange-value of her labor-power while proportionately augmenting its use-value. Surplus-value production is a losing game for human labor-power. The more the worker works, the less her labor-power is worth as exchange-value on the labor market, despite its increased productivity and hence worth (use-value) in the factory. Capitalist value comes in two varieties, absolute and relative surplus-value, each with their own distinctive political and temporal materialities that abstractly constitute human bodies as labor-power.

In absolute surplus-value the stuff of capitalist labor-time is enriched by extending the working day by a number of hours. The Lassalleans' Gotha Program calls

for “normal working hours.” Marx dismisses this language as evasive and insists that the number of working hours must be precisely specified. *This is because there can be no “normal working hours” under the capitalist value-form.* There is instead what Marx calls “the battle over the working day” that is constitutive of capitalist alienation. Capitalist valorization squeezes more work and “vital energies” out of living human labor-power – eight, ten, twelve, sixteen hours a day or more. The longer this surplus time is extended, the greater the mass of living labor-power that coagulates into capital. Absolute surplus-value production runs into political and biological limits very quickly. It is possible for capital to “accidentally” kill workers in high numbers simply by devouring their labor-power’s use-value for too long, quite apart from the intensity of the work. This is especially true for child labor, whose prospects for survival under industrial production are rather difficult to gauge, given that children’s naturally varying levels of biological development and growth makes their working days difficult to abstractly standardize. Inter-capitalist collective action sometimes has the foresight to self-impose limits to the voracity of the working day, as a kind of conservation or recycling measure for human labor-power’s temporal metabolism or bio-modal habitat. State action and working-class political movements contribute to the imposition of these limits too, which in *Capital*’s British case take the form of the Ten Hours Bill and the Factory Acts and which historically preceded industry-wide collective bargaining over working hours by unions. Marx powerfully evokes the horror and pathos of these “debates,” where the bizarre depravity of the commodity fetish and the unreality of the universal equivalent are able to make plausible claims to objectivity and common sense. In absolute-surplus value production, the bare life of human labor-power is both

threatened and protected by the contested local materiality of abstract time at (and around) the point of production. The setting of limits to the murderously accelerating ravages of capitalist time counts as a kind of victory, but it also signals a consolidation of the value-form over human material life, a reduction of human species-being to a one-sided existence as labor-power, parceled out by precarious increments of hours and wages, *at once measured and constituted by* a material range of “socially necessary” time.

Swerving around the ongoing contestation of the working day, valorization takes a second, “relative” form. In relative surplus-value production (RSVP), the length of the working day is fixed at a given range, while labor productivity is systematically increased, e.g. as output per hour. RSVP achieves this through the complex reorganization of the division of labor and introduction of large-scale machinery. Marx’s account of RSVP offers a richly physical and sensuously textured description of the continuous internal spatial reorganization of the factory, the increasingly specialization and recombination of re-skilled and de-skilled labor, the “animal spirits” of rivalry that are produced by encounters between large numbers of male bodies, and also the progressive replacement of human bodies with the “monstrous,” “Cyclopean”-scaled bodies of self-powered machinery, among many other things. Marx also argues that RSVP creates a creature called “the collective worker,” which, like the abstract labor of the universal equivalent, both measures and participates within the physical life of the factory. The collective worker is a calculable standard that emerges out of the riotous particularities of individual human workers. The accumulated empirical knowledge of human labor-power’s average time-and-motion becomes ever more refined in its material

applications. The collective worker, as the standard against which individual concrete labor-power will be measured and transformed, revises the material measure of human labor incorporeally, intangibly embodying value's constitutive terms - "socially" "necessary" "abstract" "labor" "time" - as productive forces in their own way. The obverse of the abstract worker is the reserve army of the unemployed, a body that is also an essential material element of relative surplus value production. The devaluation of labor-power's exchange-value via RSVP's machinery and productivity-gains *loosens* labor markets, *voiding* the wage-inflationary potential of full-employment. There emerges a corps of desperately poor, unemployed labor-power, whose growing mass exercises what Marx calls a gravitational pull on labor resistance and wage demands. Living human labor power under RSVP is caught between these two bodily fields, one that pressures them (more) abstractly from within the factory, another (more) concretely from outside. It is hardly surprising that workers should systematically fail to perceive the fact that they themselves *as labor-power* create these two laboring bodily forces in concert with the bourgeoisie and others, which, once produced, return to confront them at the workplace as spectral abstractions, superhuman-scaled mechanical things, and the queer irruption of new possibilities for impoverishment from "others" "outside" the labor market.

Marx identifies the process of RSVP as the core of capitalism's material logic, and yet it is also subject to an enormous range of variability. A worker congeals her human labor-power into a product at the capitalist-organized workplace using capitalist-owned machinery. While the product's exchange-value yields profits for the capitalist, a larger fraction of it returns into the labor process via sustained reinvestment into

improved productivity, infusing new life into a wider array of bodies, including those of machinery, management, the division of labor, the reproduction of her labor-power's life-force via wages, the formal labor market's stochastic gravities of supply and demand, and the emergent new logics of the collective worker. The more surplus value is reinvested into higher productivity gains via these intermediary bodies, the more its material trajectory revises and expands the universal equivalent of abstract time. This material trajectory quickly makes social impossibilities of bygone social necessities. The interwoven trajectories of capital's productive forces and relations, "social labor," field the ongoing material career of RSVP, expressed as an evolution of socio-economic temporality, which might be understood as transitory crystallized "moments" of valorization's ever expanding queer modal life.

The subtle material dynamism of abstract time is frequently confused with its more palpable and more gargantuan by-products, that is, with the pressures of intensified market competition, accelerating technological innovation, conflicted relations between the state and the spheres of private ownership, or class struggles over wealth distribution post-production. While capitalist valorization often operates through each of these important dimensions of modern political economy, such processes are best understood as contingent rather than constitutive features of capitalism. The fundamental *material* question of labor's value is not whether social labor as RSVP is threatened by automation, plagued by bourgeois hegemony or intra-proletarian division, violently repressed by state power, or unfairly or even biologically underpriced as a commodity. What is essential to the form of RSVP's materiality is rather social labor's ongoing *self-constitution* as a trajectory of abstract time, a socio-material field that should be

understood as an historically emergent logic of production, one that flattens a great many human bodies into a one-sided concrete mass of labor-power, dynamically mediating their relations with other people and the Earth through an open-ended “objective” structural order of continuously expanding wealth-production.

Marx derides early modern political economists, like Samuel Bailey, for searching out the essence of exchange value in the dumb physicality of things, as though there were something chemical about gold or diamonds that throws them naturally into the human commodity world.¹⁴⁶ Such analyses naively overlook the way in which the value-form is constituted by deep historical structures of human convention. RSVP is a variable human social form that is constructed by human consciousness, human practice, and human meaning. Marx insists, however, that human philosophical critique by itself is inadequate to the overcoming of the value-form, for the alien objectivity of capitalist value now confronts us as a complex collection of external stuff, one that has acquired a space and a physical life all of its own. Although an elusive form of appearance whose fetishistic mysteries can be penetrated to a considerable degree through critical phenomenological analysis, the capitalist value-form is also an open-ended material state-of-affairs, one that involves human consciousness with a broader range of things, spaces, and Earthly energies. The *form* of exchange-value is, then, no mere “formal” logical moment in the pristine ideality of human dialectical critique. Value is constantly (*re*)*formed* by and through the gritty, grisly empirical textures of capitalism’s open field of material stuff. The supple rain of critique upon the glassy surface of human reason cannot by itself transcend the value-form because it is not itself physically massive or coarse enough to move capital’s bodies (a point often forgotten by left dialecticians then and now.) Marx

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 177.

argues that the *materiality of the value-form*, as a collection of worldly physical relations, resists both the physiocrat's facile materialism as well as the most rigorous dialectical critique, including his own critique. Capital's value-form is neither entirely chimerical nor entirely chemical, but is rather an emergent physical/modal field generated by human conventions of consciousness and bodily practice in interaction with the Earth. Marx insists that these open-ended capitalist atmospheres and their freakishly creative human/thing relations demand closer empirical circuits between critical thinking, political praxis, and the materiality of human life.

What, then, is the *materiality* of the capitalist value-form? Capitalist matter is nothing so simple as the barbaric avarice of the bourgeoisie, the tragic failure of workers to win their "just due" through class struggle, the creative destructive anarchy of the free market, or even the many and various ways in which commodity production veils the *exploitation* of "labor." To mistake capitalism's core material logic for these important, and obscene, processes is to invite the same mistakes that the Lassalleans made and to overlook also the broader range of critique offered by Marx's *Capital*. Operating at a broader range of socio-material formation, the stuff of capitalist value is a raining flow through which human beings are continuously *constituted* as a special bodily element, "direct labor-power," within an ever-widening field of "social labor." Living human individual bodies are assembled into a one-dimensional homogenous mass of labor-power at and around the point of production, thanks to a material logic of accelerating "abstract" "necessary" time. The emergent bodily conventions of production through which human beings become subsumed under abstract time create an open-ended and "objective" structural dynamic of continuously expanding wealth-production, one that is

not reducible to class exploitation, free markets, money, or human alienation via *technological* reification only. Rather, capitalist valorization depends upon a more general “impersonal” social mode of thing-like domination over human consciousness and human bodies, one that mutually constitutes social practice and social structure through an expansive material ordering of socioeconomic temporality. This material dynamic of abstract time drives capitalism’s various trajectories far beyond the narrow corridors of bourgeois intrigue and the bears and bulls of market failure. The materiality of value is precisely *the queer abstract corporeality of socially necessary labor time*, a collective bodily life that grows, varies, travels, and shifts as valorization swerves in-between the pathways of absolute and relative surplus value. The materiality of abstract time makes of living, fragile, finite creative human bodies a globally expansive architecture of objective capitalist time. Valorization’s material flow will create a wide range of divergent pathways. For example, valorization may constitute human labor-power precisely through labor’s *de*-commodification (as with welfare-states or state ownership) as well as through its *re*-commodification (as in neo-liberalism). The material life of abstract time may arrange human bodies according to hourly wages, yearly salaries, quarterly profits, fluctuating interest rates, annual GDP rates, fiscal years, and the actuarial demographic trends of liberal capitalist mixed economies. Capitalist abstract time may also arrange itself according to Stalin’s Five Year Plans, Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and other authoritarian imperatives for rapid capital accumulation under “socialism,” particularly as these projects depend fundamentally upon the increasingly brutal divorce of labor-power from labor. The materiality of abstract time is also at work in the voids and locally arranged boundaries of capitalism’s periphery, wherein “late”

industrializing countries (Korea, for example) play a desperate game of catch-up to the West through protectionism and intensive export strategies that accumulate capital precisely by violating free market norms. RSVP's peculiar clock is also at work in the fiscal and legitimation crises of advanced capitalist democracies, as they field conflicting secular and cyclical trajectories of inflation, unemployment, the business cycle, the election cycle, and the material imperatives for sustained economic growth. Abstract time is likewise involved in the systematic failure of those same capitalist democracies, post-legitimation crises, to realize their astronomical productivity increases as wage gains, the reduction of working hours, the delinking of income from wages, or a widely felt sense of material security, prosperity, and happiness. What these various architectures of capitalist time have in common, materially, is that they assume the form of a naturally determined economic lawfulness, of seemingly impersonal and inevitable forces that promise human progress and prosperity, while in fact producing deep logics of alienation and violence in everyday life, including the routine production of human impoverishment and ecological peril, all amidst a continuous "growth" in "wealth." Abstract time only seems to be objective, inevitable, and beyond the power of human intervention; it is of course in reality a complex material creation of structured human practices with its own points of fragility, incoherence, and ambiguity.

One point of capital's material ambiguity is the fact that the value-form's formidable sense of objectivity, totality, and inevitability depends upon a wide and dynamic range of "abstractions." There is much in RSVP that evades empirical palpability. Both "abstract labor" and "socially necessary labor time" are incorporeal spaces and modes that physically field the emergence and flow of capitalist bodies.

Because of their involvement with the finer details of human psychology, scientific measurement, technological progress, and the conceptual requirements of critical theory, it is tempting to read these things as ideologies on the one side of the analytic/synthetic divide or as transhistorical economic laws or critical-theoretic “moments” on the other. However, to read these “abstract” “necessities” of the value-form as only human ideologies or critical postulates is to miss their extraordinary *physical reality* (and productivity) as elements within capital’s constitutive force fields. To read them as transhistorical assumptions about economic laws is likewise to miss their concrete historical specificity as capitalist phenomena. Marx argues that both of these incorporeal material fields are internal to and constitutive of capitalist social labor. They are in other words historically specific spaces with their own local “laws,” both of which are entirely immanent to the rain of capitalist valorization. The Lassalleans, like the worker who thinks that she is being paid the full value of her labor-power, miss the modal/spatial way of capitalist generativity, which lies not in labor-power’s exploitation but in its very material constitution, in its wider space and situation, and in its ongoing, ambient, shifting condition of possibility. This is to radically misunderstand capitalist valorization precisely by overlooking its queer incorporeality, to mistake the abstract for the concrete. This spacey empirical failure allows the Lassalleans to enter parliament and reckon distributive justice post-production as the fulfillment of labor’s “just worth.” In much the same way, the worker enters the factory and imagines that the machines, work-stations, managerial discipline, and raw materials are all assembled to maximize the exchange-value of her work, not diminish it, to shorten her workday, not extend it, to sustain her body, not devour it. The intangible spaces of the value-form are essential to its strangely

elastic materiality, both as an economically productive body and as a seemingly natural way of thinking about wealth, work, and the wonders of social modernity. Lucretius would call these locally lawful energies and spaces *void*.

2.2: Returning Marx to Lucretius: Relative Surplus Value Production and the Local Matter Model

This section will argue that Lucretius' local materialism can help socialist value-critique to politically engage the materiality of capital's value-form. In a loose imitation of Lucretius' poetic approach to the things of the Roman Republic, I will try to recast the queer dynamics of relative surplus value production as a case of local materiality, one that requires a demotic empiricist theory and practice. Value-critique would be better able to publicly address and politically situate capitalist globalization if it gave closer empirical attention to a wider range of bodies, including the Earth. Valorization's critics should also think politically about voids, this in order to discern spaces of encounter, collision, and creativity amidst the heavy orbits of "abstract" labor and socially "necessary" time. Marx's critique of capital, renowned for its materialism, is not nearly materialist enough. Value-critique could use some help from a different model of materiality, perhaps running alongside or creatively colliding against *Capital*'s dialectical one, in order to rethink the weird, unruly, multiple world of contemporary RSVP.

Marx theorized *Capital*'s value-form as the final element within what he termed "the materialist conception of history," what would later be known as "dialectical" or "historical materialism." On this theory valorization leads teleologically to a falling rate of profit and the formation of a revolutionary proletariat as a world-historical subject.

Capital's "forces of production" (technology and the technical division of labor) will develop in contradiction to its "relations of productions" (classes), engendering revolutionary crisis and the transition to communism, understood as the material and spiritual overcoming of humanity's alienation from itself and from nature as a whole. Historical materialism depends upon a base-superstructure distinction and a stage theory of history, one that is driven by an immanent *telos* of natural human equality that is itself grounded in the essence of our species-being. Well-ordered according to a lawful dialectical logic, relations and forces of production produce their own mutually determined contradictions, which in turn create revolutionary contradictions in the superstructure of state and culture. Historical materialism is materialist in that, first, it gives priority to "material" socioeconomic forces in the generation of societies, and second, it holds that the forms that these forces take are historically specific to a given mode of production as an organic unity. (Historical materialism in this way both "materializes" history and "historicizes" matter.) As both a theory of history and of matter, historical materialism depends upon hard ontological distinctions between relations and forces of production and between base and superstructure, as well as a conception of society as a richly unified totality. The theory also depends upon a global conception of socioeconomic evolution that posits a progressive stage theory of human history governed by a final end.

In the "Critique of the Gotha Program," Marx argues that the Prussian value-form is emerging without anything like the felt momentum of a revolutionary *telos*. Neither does the base-superstructure distinction provide much guidance here, for the Junker's German Empire is most certainly a force of production in its own way, one that also

makes nonsense of any orderly evolution of feudal absolutism into bourgeois democracy. To Marx's horror, Junker capitalism also seems to be incorporating German socialism and perhaps Germany's growing proletarian minority as well. Waiting for capitalism to subvert Bismarck is foolish, Marx argues, given the demonstrated ability of the Junkers to ride out industrialization via class compromise at home and militarist expansion abroad. Valorization is indeed transforming Bismarck's Germany into a new capitalist power, but we might say that there is also an *aleatory political materiality* to the emergent Prussian value-form that the Lassalleans are somehow unable to feel. The Lassalleans' obliviousness toward these new imperial things reflects, Marx insists, a fundamental failure to grasp the value-form's *variability*, which is why he suggests that they read *Capital* more carefully. There they would have discovered that capitalist value is not merely *maldistributed wealth*, but a *productive material power*, a collection of bodies that is inter-involved with a complex, shifting modal field. Among other things, this means that socialism's existential commitment to equality must overcome the reification of human bodies into abstract labor, not merely redistribute wages and working hours into a fairer universal equivalent. The latter maneuver would only rearrange capitalism's constitutive bodies, rather than transform them into socialism. The Lassalleans' failures are not only theoretical but also empirical, even ontological. There is something unreal in their "socialism," an unearthly existential cowardice that confuses the stuff and spaces of German wealth and value. Their naïve "program" ends up flatly re-embodying the ghoulish absurdities of the commodity fetish. Like the workers who fall into the inhuman dance between houses, shoes, linen, and coats, Lassalleian socialism

allows itself to be sucked – voided – into a vacuous logic of factories, wages, taxes, classes, and empire, all in the name of material progress, equality, even “labor.”

Political thinking about Junker surplus-value production requires something more empirically specific than a category like “the capitalist mode of production,” if this is understood in the sense as an economic “base,” or as a social totality, or as a world-historical stage of development. As a model of materiality, the “thing-hood” of historical materialism’s bases, totalities, and stages is too global, too deterministic, and too monolithic to generate a feel for the variously mobile and historically contingent stuff of Prussian valorization. Such finalistic and monolithic images of matter end up doing a lot of mischief in the hands of the Lassalleans. Stuck against the empiricist rock and the historicist hard place, the would-be dialectical materialism of the Lassalleans fizzles out somewhere between Ricardo and Hegel. Marx castigates the Lassalleans for their clumsy and crude grasp of his dialectic, but what may be needed here instead is another *materialism*, one that swerves in and around the logical conventions of dialectical thought. Lassalle’s friends could use a finer-grained sense for social labor’s local trajectories, a *materially broadened yet historically specified* feel for the supple textures and the turbulent range of capitalist things.

Lucretius’ demotic empiricism wagers that the Roman people might generate a noble sensuous knowledge of their city precisely by thinking and feeling a broader collection of organic and inorganic bodies, broader than the narrow bodily ranges of the Senate, the aristocracy, the temple cults, or the bodies of gods. By widening and quickening the thought variety of Roman things, demotic empiricism draws a generous yet prudential political space for human bodies. Guided by Lucretius’ careful poetic

attention to Rome's broader range, which includes the bodies of cows, dust motes, prostitutes, soldiers, clouds, and plagues, among many other things, the Roman line might better sense their republic as a finite material state of affairs, and in doing so avoid the militarist domination of Religious Fear. A more voluptuous ethos of demotic empiricism along these same lines would have done German socialism a world of good in 1875. We have already noted, for example, how Marx presciently argues here for a wider political and ethical range for class struggle that goes beyond the German proletarian minority in order to make coalitions with the peasant majority and the petit-bourgeoisie, creating new spaces for public action within and beyond the Reichstag. Militarist Religious Fear is also a palpable thing in Bismarck's new German Empire, and here again the Lassalleans do seem to be falling for it.

The Lassalleans are also falling for the conventional bourgeois conflation of wealth, value, and labor's just due. Lucretius' poetry invites the Roman people to let go of the false objectivities and dreadful determinisms of gods, myths, and civic destiny in order to better sense their finite, falling, swerving city. Marx's attack on the Gotha Program's labor theory of value searches after something similar for the socioeconomics of Bismarck's Germany, a political empiricism that slacks off on the grandeurs of historicism by appealing to a kind of public common sense. A locally aleatory demotic empiricism would help the proletariat to better sense the varied constitutive bodies of the value-form, especially the many ways in which capitalist value reifies their individual human bodies into direct labor-power through abstract time. By enlarging workers' empirical attention toward the wider bodily ranges that subsume human labor-power into capitalist labor, much as Marx does in *Capital's* more finely sensuous descriptions of

RSVP, workers would gain a broadened feel for their own subsumption by machinery, the capitalist organization of the workplace, the virtual agency of the collective worker, and the lively gravities of the reserve army of the unemployed. German workers would then better understand that these other bodily fields are not ontologically alien to their labor-power but are rather its products and the emergent conditions of its extended reproduction under capitalism. A worker's alienation stems more fundamentally from her material coagulation into the capitalist value-form as such, which involves a broader bodily range of capitalist labor precisely as labor, including machinery, management, other workers, the unemployed, and even, in certain crucial ways, the bourgeoisie. The commodity fetish that gives workers the idea that they sell "labor" rather than their labor-power depends upon a radically circumscribed range of falsely privatized common sense, a habituated failure to *feel* factories as relative surplus-value producers rather than as only wealth, wage, or profit producers. The German proletariat could use a wider material sensibility in order to perceive and think the weirdly plastic facts of RSVP: that valorization is materially prior to capitalist price, profit, and wealth; that machines diminish labor's exchange-value by increasing its use-value, thereby making a bloody muddle of labor's "just worth;" that the "normal" working day is an accelerating threat to workers' existence as well as a material condition for their survival and resistance; and that Germany and the world as a whole is rearranging into a newly open-ended productive order of socio-material life. Complexly abstract theories like those found in *Capital* can help to produce such knowledge, as can the hard lessons of political defeat after the fact. Yet Marx's critique of the Lassalleans urges something lower, broader, and looser in the way of political empiricism, some more publicly vital way of knowing the

tragic, fluid stuff of capitalist motion and its domination of human bodies. If the task is to know capitalism's constitutive things in that broader, lower, looser, more sensuous way, Lucretius' civic *ataraxia* is a better fit than Hegel stood on his head.

Because demotic empiricism scales up as well as down in its feel for political bodies, Lucretius' local materiality could also help socialism to better think the value-form's macro-level arrangements and their middle-range variability over time. The civic body of Rome in Lucretius' day is shifting from republic to civil war and dictatorship, a shift driven and concealed by the citizenry's own Religious Fear. German capitalism will shift historically, too. The macro-stuff of Prussian RSVP will shift its aggregate forms because human labor-power is an essentially unstable material element within the elastic modal field of capitalist labor. Marx wants the workers' movement to realize that German capitalism is for now rooted in Junker plantations, but he insists that it will not remain that way forever, and anticipates that capitalism will continue to exercise its thing-ish domination in the not-too-distant era of mass unionization, parliamentary democracy, and corporatist welfare states. German socialism must learn how to swerve the trajectory of valorization in the near-term and the middle-range, which means participating in the "necessities" of abstract time while also undertaking to resist and overcome them. This in turn requires a deep and abiding awareness of how capitalist value reconstitutes itself through variation as well as a sustained empirical openness to the recognition of capital's new macro-arrangements, particularly as this new stuff will itself emerge in response to workers' resistance (much as RSVP emerged from ASVP). Raising wages, improving working conditions, and expanding the welfare state will depend upon provisional (and politically charged) inflations of labor-power's value,

demotic and solidaristic logics of equivalence that, while falling short of socialism, will interrupt and push a given range of RSVP. The problem, Marx argues, is that these higher wages and the new standards for the “normal” working day are all too readily mistaken for the transcendence of the value-form as such. The Lassalleans’ world-historical rhetoric of proletarian universalism, borrowed liberally from Marx and Engels’ own “Manifesto,” fuels such misrecognitions precisely by conflating the proletariat with capitalist labor and by consequently overestimating the proletariat’s near-term material power. A more demotic empiricism could help German socialism to inhabit and maneuver capitalism precisely by attending to the material variability of the value-form as a self-aggregating body in motion, a growing, changing, rearranging *thing* that is itself made up of other things, to which the living human things of labor-power remain vitally yet precariously attached. German socialism needs a finer empirical knowledge for the variability of capital’s mediations of finite human life, and this requires a better sense for the relationships between politics, history, people, and things, one that would feel a lot more like Lucretius’ tragic, Venus-like embrace of the swerving Roman line and a lot less like Hegel’s triumphalist, Mars-like march of the world-spirit on horseback.

Rather than try to march with God through History, then, German socialism would do better to feel and swerve its way through the capitalist rain. German workers must learn to better encounter the voids that lie at the onto-physical core of relative surplus value production, this in order to swerve its constitutive stuff and spaces “locally.” Surplus value production depends upon a modally queer space between work and wages and between labor and labor-power. Bourgeois profit, which seemingly arrives *ex nihilo* in a world of equilibrium prices, in fact emerges through the continuous

spatial rearrangement of human labor-power in and around the factory. In the surface world of bourgeois appearances, the factory is indeed “tightly-packed” according to natural, technological, and economic laws. Capitalist production appears to be nothing more than the progressive application of technology to nature; machines, workstations, and the working day are all arranged just so in order to maximize efficiency. The actual materiality underlying these economic surface conventions is considerably less orderly and deterministic, of course; it is soaked and surrounded by the active possibility of going elsewhere and becoming otherwise. Capitalist production is inherently a socio-physical process that organizes technology in a peculiarly self-alienating way, fielding precarious finite human bodily labor-power within an ongoing material trajectory of infinite abstract time. Interrupting this broader architecture requires much more than the redistribution of wealth or the nationalization of industries.

A locally materialist value-critique would help socialism to contest the emergent logics of RSVP directly by fielding voids within the working day’s range of socially necessary abstract labor time. Living human labor power must both discern and create – “quicken to life” - new modal spaces between itself and “abstract labor,” machinery, “the collective worker,” and the reserve army of the unemployed. This involves inter- and intra-class struggles, among other things, but it is more fundamentally a struggle over the very material field that produces and distributes classes, in various ways, including the many varieties of the proletariat and the many classes that are less powerful than the proletariat. Contesting RSVP ‘s endless revisions of socially necessary abstract labor time requires a complex, subtle, and long-range struggle over the materialities of technological change and the lived social organization of the factory and its broader

environs. A local materialist socialism brings workers and others a better sense of the broader material force-fields that constitute surplus-value production and the reproduction of their labor-power in order to rearrange these fields' spaces of indeterminacy and creative change. By exposing and rearranging RSVP's voids, local materialist socialism undermines capitalism's overbearing aura of objectivity, determinism, and totality, much as Lucretius hoped Romans might undermine Sulla's Mars-inspired imperialist dictatorship by rethinking the city's foundational physics. Even small shifts within the queer modal fields of capital can reveal socially necessary abstract labor time to be something that is much less lawfully necessary than it seems to be, opening up new zones for encounter and maneuver with it. More finely attuned to the particular and the aleatory than even the subtlest dialectic, a Lucretian politics of demotic void could help to push the queer physics of abstract labor, and its thing-like field of social domination, into someplace more palpably human.

Besides the courage to face political and historical voids for the open creative spaces of material contingency that they are, German socialism could also use a Democritean sense for the raining turbulence that afflicts democratic projects as well as a sharpened sense of militancy and vigilance toward the energies of state power and the state apparatus. Democritus recommends that democrats undertake ongoing material practices of civic vigilance, harmony, solidarity, and militancy in order to face the deadly voids of warfare, strife, and "prosperity" that emerge in and around the democratic *polis*, a state-tending project that is never fully consolidated or entirely safe or just. Obviously, Bismarck's German Empire is no ancient Abdera, and even Marx concurs with the Lassalleans that it is for now too dangerous to demand a full-blown republic. However,

Marx does urge instead, without quite being able to name it, that German socialism adopt something like Democritus' prescriptions for local democratic prudence for civic bodies. This means participating in elections for Prussia's constitutionally weak parliament in order bring socialists closer to state power and state power closer to socialism, but it also requires a careful involvement with other political bodies that for now subsist far away from the body of the state apparatus, such as workers' coops and public schools. (We will later call these smaller political things "institutions.") Contrary to the Lassalleans, Marx does not want the workers coops nationalized or for public schools to be directed by the state in the name of equality; rather he insists that these institutions should be kept at a sustained distance from the state apparatus. This is because, Marx suggests, the workers' coops and public schools embody *minor demotic logics of equivalence* that resist the mainstream of valorization to a meaningful degree and also evade for now the nets cast by Bismarck's state-building. The Lassalleans fail to perceive this because of their willful blindness to the materiality of the state apparatus and their lack of demotic empirical sense for capitalism's, and socialism's, wider range.

The Democritean prescriptions for *polis* bodies can help German socialism to generate an empirical feel for democratic initiatives that consists in neither fidelity to far-off transcendental ideals nor in servile affirmations of existing state power, but rather in a constantly redrawn micropolitical field for militancy and vigilance. If German socialism were able to render Prussia's proto-democratization as a palpable, ongoing physical state of affairs for finite human bodies, accompanied by spaces of ambiguity, creativity, violence, and existential compromise and danger, rather than as a transcendental ethical ideal or as the lawful evolutionary development of the state-form, then it would be more

likely to make better felt judgments about the near-term trajectories of state power and the ongoing false equivalences of the commodity fetish as well. Socialism, Marx argues in the “Critique,” cannot just *declare* people to be equal, or even proclaim “workers” to be equal. German democracy, whatever it is and however it might come about, does not and cannot consist in the equivalences of capitalist labor. This is, among many other reasons, because “we” do not only bear *our own labor-power* under capitalism; the ghoulish equivalences of the value-form, which operate “sensibly” and “fairly” in capital’s local logic, produce material differences among and upon us that go deeper than struggles between and among classes. These differences, at once logically contradictory and yet real enough to be palpably repellant, *do not disappear* the moment they are demystified by democratic consciousness, not even by the “Manifesto’s” call for workers of the world to unite. A modernized Democritean militant physics, its determinism swerved and leavened with an Epicurean generosity toward difference, can help us to sense and judge how other people’s life-forces coagulate into the abstract labor that reproduces “our” labor-power. Just as Democritus warns that strife and warfare turn good citizens into murderous animals, so also does capitalist abstract time make cannibalized and cannibalistic freaks out of would-be “equal” citizens, especially the proletariat. To keep the ghoulish equalities of the commodity fetish from ravaging the still delicate and disconnected stuff of democratization’s immanent rain, demotic democrats must find material ways to continuously and militantly reassemble themselves in open spaces toward other people and toward the state, sometimes in close quarters and sometimes at arms length, *long before* there is anything like the stable unification of the proletariat as a class in- or for-itself. The difficulty lies in doing this without abandoning

democratic projects altogether and without retreating into the other-worldly realms of transcendental ideality in order to falsely (or, if you must, “prematurely”) proclaim the proletariat as a triumphal world-historical subject, via a socialist General Will or Categorical Imperative, say, or a socialist Religious Fear.

The latter possibility is worth some closer attention because Marx is uncharacteristically worried about religion in these notes, in particular about how the Lassalleans’ draft deals with the emerging politics of religion in imperial Prussia. While applauding the program’s honorable defense of religious freedom in the face of Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* against German Catholics, Marx also wants the draft to be more combative in its public opposition to religious “witchery.” Nowhere in these polemical rejoinders does Marx offer the old historical materialist assurances from the “Manifesto” that capitalism will do the work of secularization for socialism. Secularism, like socialism, is no sure thing in Bismarck’s capitalist Empire; indeed, its very fragility raises questions about socialism’s existential identity that throw Marx’s political calculations here up in the air. Does Marx, who advises caution and calculation in all things during this touch-and-go period for German socialism, really want the party to wage a public ideological war against religion in all of its forms, this in addition to standing with the liberal minority for religious freedom? What has happened to the strategic priority of bringing into socialism the peasant majority and the middle-classes, both of which are at the moment distinctly unreceptive to full-blown religious freedom, let alone atheism? Lucretius’ materialism could be of great use here, too, because Marx’s treatment of religion, politics, and the value-form in the “Critique” and *Capital* betrays more than a note or two of anxiety over secularism and existential belief more broadly. These

anxieties are themselves close to what Lucretius calls Religious Fear, despite Marx's own ostensive atheism, in that they involve a systematic political failure to publicly engage others on (1) the conflicting facts and meanings of human finitude, (2) the open and contingent voids of human-species futurity, and (3) the material pressures that the existential beliefs of others exert upon Marx's world and the political bodies in which he is involved. We can make a distinction here between (a) the believers' public fears about the future and (b) the atheists' public fears about a future that is itself produced by (a), but the materially political point is that these two species of public future fearing flow into one another and produce anxiously "unreal" political judgments and practices on all sides, "Religious Fear." To remedy this Marx's materialism needs something like a *demotic public therapeutics of civic ataraxia*, which would surely be out of place within a national party platform but might do a lot of good elsewhere in the German workers' movement, if the right range of voids could be created. A more modestly prudential and publicly engaged atheism, on the model of either the quiet philosophical friendships of the scattered Epicurean Garden or the gently tragic civic poetry of "The Way of Things," could do much more to support religious freedom and resist Religious Fear than anything like the Gotha Program.

A grassroots mellowing of Prussia's public Religious Fear would subvert superstition in general but it would more specifically also help to demystify the "secular" order of capitalist abstract time, in particular the existential elements of valorization's futurity. In *Capital* Marx argues that the capitalist value-form was anticipated historically by the anxious abstractions of Christian universalism. If it should turn out that capitalism, contrary to Weber, is indeed *sustaining* this fearful religious fragment of

its abstract origins rather than dialectically *dissolving* it into secularism, then its value-form would involve an un-thought existential material element for both the ongoing “abstractions” of human labor-power and the “necessities” of abstract time. Neither unions nor state power can confront the witchery of these elements without violating religious freedom or courting defeat: Marx’s proposal for an atheists-only socialist movement is itself a kind of convulsive magical thinking. Religious Fear is likely to infect the rhetoric of value-critique anyway, however, particularly if such rhetoric follows too faithfully Marx’s own fondness for eschatological imagery or Engels’ comparisons of the scientific socialists to the early Christians. Such attitudes could produce “fateful” problems later on for socialism’s conceptions of its own material trajectory. For example, it is not difficult to imagine how a putatively “socialist” “secularism” could produce unthought support for the continued abstraction of human labor-power under social democracy or communism, fielding a material architecture of objectified, alienated futurity through the concealed reifications of various kinds of faith, unbelief, *ressentiment*, and of course plain old fear of death. These self-concealing practices of socioeconomic bad faith might well make the impoverished torpor of such a “socialism” seem like the inevitably disenchanted “fate” of modern secular and technological life, rather than a contingent and fragile arrangement of social labor that itself fields a theistic species of RSVP. A more demotic materialist socialism could make such eventualities less “inevitable” by artfully engaging big questions such as (1) how best to face death? and (2) how do a wide range of variously lived practices of facing death *make a material difference* to the constitutive existential dispositions of capitalist and socialist futurity?

This could have been extremely useful for anti-capitalists in the Germany Empire of 1875, and elsewhere too.

While demotic ataraxy can help capital's citizens to think more seriously about the politics of finite human thing-hood, this does not mean that local materialism regards things and void *in themselves* as mere occasions for human existential reflection or political praxis, which was the Hegel-inspired assumption of the younger Marx's doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus. The cosmic matter-void field wherein we live and create meaning does not itself care in the least about human existential inquiet or about human oppression. Lucretius' ethics and politics can therefore follow only loosely from his physics, as these same physics can also support a wide variety of rival ethical and political projects, as we saw in the first chapter. This wide and variable space between physics and ethics/politics could not itself be otherwise both because the unruly stuff of the local matter model exists in-itself apart from human technologies, cultures, and consciousness, and also because there is something about Lucretius' things that continuously resists human mastery, understanding, and convention. Matter's quanta shift about amidst void's turbulent flows and the buzzing obstinacy of other bodies, creating and destroying all possible pathways, orders, and laws as they go. Lucretius' local matter model can help value-critique to better understand capitalism's queer dynamics precisely by insisting on this ontological and physical point about things in-themselves, quite apart from their use, exchange, or representation in human practice. This can in turn help value-critique to better conceive of both the self-organizing creativity of capitalism's thing-hood and the many ways in which physical nature, human and nonhuman, resists and modifies the trajectories of capitalist development.

Marx's value-critique vacillates on this question of the autonomous productive power of things-in-themselves. Marx usually figures matter as a passive, lifeless vehicle for human world-history and our species-being's creativity, struggle, alienation, and freedom. Such is the materiality of historical materialism and its anthropocentric dialectic. Elsewhere in his writing, however, Marx insists upon ascribing a productive power to "nature" and the "Earth," understood as protean creative bodies that at once ground and disrupt the conventional conceits of the value-form. "*Nature* is just as productive of use-values" as human labor, Marx reminds the Lassalleans. The problem with the Lassalleans here is that they anthropomorphize use-value to the point of erasing sensuous physical nature altogether, which then leads them in turn to falsely naturalize the contingent human conventions of exchange-value. The result is that their socialism ends up being captured by the capitalist value-form in general and by the Junker agricultural variant of it in particular. To set the Lassalleans' materialism on back on its empirical feet, however, requires that Marx say more about the productive power of things than he says here or anywhere else in his writings. We have noted already that Marx does here refer in passing to the "material, etc. conditions" that capitalism has created for the value-form's possible overcoming. At first glance this formulation certainly sounds materialist enough as far as it goes, but read more closely Marx seems to have casually introduced a slippage, perhaps even a dichotomy or a dualism, between capital's emergent materiality and its historically specific human "etc." Returning Marx to the wider and more unruly materiality of Lucretius could help to both field and fill-in that crucial "etcetera" without recourse to an unearthly anthropocentrism or a heavenly finalism. In doing so, Lucretius' local materialism could help value-critique to

empirically and politically evade capture by the ambient material variability of the value-form, which is what I take Marx to mean by its “etcetera conditions.” For again it will be all too frequently forgotten that RSVP’s thing-ish domination of human life consists materially in its queer variability and its ever-shifting void.

2:3: Conclusion: Capitalist Globalization and Large Republican Inequality

This chapter has rehearsed some important moments in the later Marx’s critique of capitalism, with some support and revision from the local matter model of Lucretius. If we have dwelt at some length upon the controversies of German socialism in 1875, it has been with the purpose of making comparisons and claims about the large republic and capitalist globalization in the twenty-first century. This conclusion will briefly discuss the contemporary implications of these points more explicitly.

Marx’s critique of capital is worth rehearsing with some care because it offers a powerful conception of capitalism as a form social domination, a thing-field of alienation and violence that routinely distorts and destroys the stuff of human living. Capital’s reification of human labor-power sustains poverty amidst extraordinary wealth, misery amidst unrivaled productivity, and unfreedom amidst unprecedented liberty. The capitalist value-form fields a brutal yet often subtle and imperceptible mediation of humans’ material relationships with one another, with other living and non-living things, and with the Earth.

Capitalism, then, is neither a set of narrow economic interests, like corporations or stock markets, nor a set of policies like low tax rates or free trade. Neither should capitalism be understood as an abstractly normative feature of the liberal social contract,

such as the Lockean right to bodily self-ownership or the consequent right to private property. Supporters of such things defend them by defending capitalism at best only indirectly, if at all, and much the same can be said for their opponents who would do away with such things. Capitalism is rather an ongoing socio-material process that mutually constitutes a wide range of social structures and social practices behind the back of the political. Although usually identified with capitalism as such, free markets and private property are dispensable and historically contingent features of capitalist distribution. Capitalism is instead a broad and shifting material logic of production, what Marx calls “social labor.” This means that capitalism’s social domination does not fundamentally consist of maldistributed wealth, circulated via processes of class domination, state power, or the anarchy of the market, for example. As massively destructive and unjust as these processes are, they are only by-products of capitalism’s broader orderings of human material life. This also means that it is not feasible to tame or overthrow capitalism only through macroeconomic regulation, welfare-state redistribution, or even through a common ownership of the immediate producers. This is because capitalism is a physical state of affairs that is routinely reconstituted via a wider, ambient field of social production, reconnecting and rearranging the immediate production of factories within a broader range of socio-material interdependencies.

Capitalism does not fundamentally *alienate* or *exploit* social labor but rather *materially constitutes it* through the freakish equivalences of the value-form and the ongoing operation of RSVP. As Moishe Postone has argued, value-critique conceives of labor as the *object* rather than the *subject* of critical praxis.¹⁴⁷ “Labor” is not the critical-

¹⁴⁷ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-22.

revolutionary perspective of socialism, a standpoint that first must be faithfully represented in theory and practice against the commodity fetish and then preserved for socialism's more egalitarian relations of production. Labor is instead a phenomenological moment that is entirely *internal* to the capitalism value-form itself, a deeper form of appearance than the commodity fetish but one that is still well short of anything like a metaphysical essence. Value-critique does not adopt the socio-political *standpoint* of labor, its subject-positions, or ideologies, in order to realize the proletariat's true or just worth under socialism. Rather, value-form socialism aims to de-constitute labor-power from its formal subsumption to capitalist labor and in turn to free living human beings from their one-sided reification as labor-power. Value *qua* socially necessary abstract labor time is not a material state of affairs that socialism will technically perfect, liberate, fulfill, or justify by bringing it to public light. Capitalist relative surplus-value production is the continuous rearrangement of human material being that socialism will overcome through the political dissolution of the value-form itself. Unlike a Lockean labor theory of value, Marx's value-form is a historically emergent material state of affairs that must itself be voided, not a transhistorical ethical truth about human nature and work to be realized through a just social contract. Were a socialist social contract, liberal or otherwise, to emerge out of capitalism it would measure wealth, work, and individual and social wants and needs by a much richer and diverse range of standards than the impoverished "objectivities" of abstract labor and socially necessary time. Socialism on this conception does not preserve the capitalist value-form in the course of transcending it, but over time just leaves the stuff of RSVP behind in the dust. The test for socialist politics is not mainly whether the proletariat is

able to abolish the bourgeois class through the redistribution of wealth but whether the proletariat and others are able to abolish class itself en route to the abolition of abstract time through the democratic reorganization of social production, according to emergent new possibilities for equality, freedom, and justice. There are enormous ambiguities and tensions in this formulation of socialism, but the urgent importance of politically engaging these difficulties may become more apparent to us if we bear in mind just what kind of thing RSVP is in the first place.

Capitalist globalization in the twenty-first century has produced an astonishing range of expansions and rearrangements of the value-form. Political and social theory today struggles with new and empirically complex questions as to how and in what ways globalization might be specifically *capitalist* in Marx's sense. A preliminary list of such emergent phenomena might include the following: globalization's multiple shifts in scale in both production and trade; global capitalism's multiple material re-orderings of temporality and speed; the multiple capitalist machineries known as "the computer," which we are often told will reduce the working day and enhance (not diminish) the value of work; the multiple capitalist factories known as "the Internet," which pretend to be only an anarchically networked *agora* for exchange and communication (and therefore the opposite of anything like a factory); and finally, capitalism's complex political relations with state power, civil society, the public sphere, and micropower. Capitalist globalization so far betrays no hint of fielding anything like its determinate negation; socialism as the transcendence of abstract time is simply nowhere on the horizon. While there exist important spaces for resistance to and reform of capitalism's trajectories, it is difficult to escape the sense that most of the human species will live within capital's

thing-field of abstract time for some time to come. In order to field some voids between this “time to come” and the futurity of capital’s abstract “necessary” time, democrats and other alienated creatures must gather a demotic sense for capitalism’s lower elements and surfaces, the emergent arrangements of its macro-scale dominations, and the local possibilities for moving valorization elsewhere and otherwise. We must also find ways to maneuver in and around capital’s bodies in the near- and middle-range, even as “we” know that “our” equalities are distorted and threatened by those of abstract labor and that what counts as a “range” must often flow with the turbulent tides of capitalist time itself.

The material situation of contemporary capitalist globalization in the large republic invites comparisons to earlier capitalist periods, especially Marx’s nineteenth century. This chapter has suggested that the 1875 “Critique of the Gotha Program” provides a better point of comparison for the present-day than the 1848 “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” The Manifesto is doubtless more popular as a point of comparison both because of its soaring revolutionary vision of class struggle and also for its prescient account of capitalism’s emergence as a global power. Despite its many moments of dazzling subtlety, however, the Manifesto is also in important respects a politically simpler document than the “Critique.” This stems in large measure from the Manifesto’s historical materialist theory of class struggle. The proletariat of the Manifesto is figured as a hulking revolutionary subject, a sleeping giant steeled by Promethean technologies and unified by the discipline of capitalist labor. If twenty-first century capitalism produces at long last a worldwide proletarian majority, industrial or otherwise, capable of acting as a universal subject internationally or even nationally case-by-case, then this chapter will have offered precisely the wrong reading of Marx. Kant and Hegel will have

turned out to be more useful to socialism than Lucretius after all. The local materialist value-critique advanced here assumes capitalist structuration to be a radically more complex process that produces a wider variety of classes and class struggles cross-nationally as well as a range of material indeterminacies around the question of class itself. Capitalist globalization is today utterly remote from the Manifesto's world of only two class camps. Local materialist value-critique also assumes that the transhistorical stage theory and base-superstructure distinctions of the Manifesto's historical materialism are no longer sufficient or even useful categories for the stuff of post-liberal capitalism. *Capital's* central category of RSVP, what Marx calls "social labor" in the "Critique," obscures any hard distinction between relations and forces of production, not to mention base and superstructure. Historical materialism does not serve as a conceptual foundation for local materialism's account of globalization; its totalizing, finalistic, and monolithic stuff loosens and gives way to the queer local materialities of value, labor, and abstract time.

Reading Marx's value-critique through the demotic empiricism of Lucretius' local matter model opens broader possibilities for reconstructing it for the world of twenty-first century capitalist globalization. This chapter has proposed that egalitarian critics of globalization consider Prussian capitalism in something like the same way that Lucretius wanted Rome to think about the Athenian plague two hundred years before. The anxious objectivities of Religious Fear and the lawful myth of Rome's sacred foundations obscure, tragically, the fragile, falling, swerving physics of the Roman Republic. Lucretius hopes that his poetry might help to bring the Roman line to its blessed senses with its closing book of gruesome naturalist verse and its finely textured descriptions of

how the bloody horror of plague followed from Athens' war for empire. To be captured by the capitalist value-form, to confuse value for wealth, RSVP for technology, and empire for democracy, is to radically mistake the materiality of our political being for something rational, just, progressive, and secure. The dialectical finalisms of class struggle or the falling rate of profit are distinctly unlikely to sense or evade these voids of abstract time on their own. Large republican denizens of capitalist globalization could use a local materialist democracy too, in order to better swerve in and around capital's anxious insistence upon its own objectivity, inevitability, and totality.

Chapter Three: Voice, Power, and Demotic Ataraxy

The Task Force's public report begins its first chapter by invoking "equal political voice."¹⁴⁸

Equal political voice and democratically responsive government are widely cherished American ideals – yet as the United States aggressively promotes democracy abroad, these principles are under growing threat in an era of rising and persistent inequalities at home.¹⁴⁹

These opening lines appeal to the idea of *responsiveness to voice*, too, which the report takes to be an essential feature of democratic government as well as a cornerstone of the American creed. There is also, in this invocation of equal political voice, a *sotto voce* worry, one that alludes quietly to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, accompanied by a soft note of skepticism as to whether democracy can be "aggressively" promoted "abroad" when political voice is threatened "at home."

What is "political voice?" If "voice" is not restricted to the work of human vocal cords, "speech," then what broader relationships, powers, meanings, and forces are gathered under this narrowly drawn figure of the human spoken sound? What does it mean to assemble all of these things together behind the adjective "political"? Or is voice itself inherently political? What, in either case, might count then as *equal* political voice? Do the voices get equalized by politics, or does politics get equalized by voices? How should political voice, whatever it is, occasion political responsiveness – from government, publics, cultures, or individuals? How might unequal voice, in all of its varieties, invite or inflect other kinds of inequality? These definitional ambiguities around "equal political voice" should unsettle vocal democrats of all kinds and egalitarian pluralists in particular. These questions trouble the idea of demotic harmony too, a power

¹⁴⁸ Lawrence Jacobs and Theda Skocpol ed. *Inequality and American Democracy*, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

that depends upon many people creating an active sense for one another as *other public beings*, especially during those moments when their senses are awash with many other signals, noises, pressures, threats.

With these questions hanging in the air, this chapter will draw on Hannah Arendt and Lucretius to evoke a particular conception of political voice, one different from that of the Task Force. In reflecting upon the politics of voice in a twenty-first century large republic, the chapter will also consider how *egalitarian* political voices might generate responsiveness to a *greater range* of voices, and equalities, at “home” and “abroad.” The frictions between “equal” and “greater” here point to the territorial ambivalence of democratic voice, for voices carry. In thinking about how voices carry unequally, this chapter will also critically engage the report’s all too *sotto voce* concerns about violence and empire. In this introductory section I will briefly contrast Arendt’s conception of political voice with those of the Task Force and James Madison. In the following section, I will consider voice in terms of Arendt’s kindred conception of powerlessness, drawing on her account of the incipient voiceless field that she calls “the sand storm.”¹⁵⁰ I will then put the Arendtian image of voicelessness into conversation with demotic ataraxy, drawing an account of human-dog relations from “abroad” as an example of how Arendt and Lucretius might work together to theorize human-dog voice/power. The story about human-dog politics is embedded within Anne Norton’s account of sex, gender, torture, and “the Muslim question” in the Abu Ghraib scandal.¹⁵¹ Using Lucretius, Arendt, and Norton, I want to think about the difference between power and powerlessness in human-

¹⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1973).

¹⁵¹ Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

dog politics, with specific attention to what this difference might tell us about voice and inequality in the post-9/11 United States.

This chapter will argue that Lucretian demotic ataraxy and the Arendtian conception of power can together offer a more refined and ambulatory image of political voice. This image of voice should be publicly useful for denizens of the multiply unequal post-9/11 large republic, who are often voiceless even when they are routinely “responded to” by omnipresent advertising, more inflammatory and bellicose punditry, more aggressive police tactics, intensified government surveillance, questions for and about Muslims, and the War on Terror, among many other things. This chapter’s admixture of Arendt and Lucretius offers three related elements for a more experimental prosody for large republican social movements: first, a touch-and-go sense for the aleatory force of self-disclosure in historical time, the kind of Lucretian swerves that drive Arendtian natality, which, when publicly shared with many individuals, generates power; second, a local knowledge of the larger voids that encompass public realms and other spaces of appearance; and third, a feel for the persistent surface frictions between plurality, alterity, earth, and world, which depend vitally upon a more finely grained human responsiveness to nonhuman voices.

This is all very different from the notion of “equal political voice” offered by the Task Force. Beyond the conceptual ambiguities surrounding voice, the Task Force’s invocation of voice glosses over important locutionary problems too. Much like the report’s invocation of the American creed elsewhere, the “cherished ideal” of equal voice is used here to sing a popular sovereignty: the very popularity of equal voice as an ideal “speaks to” the foundational wholeness of the republic, a kind of refrain that is enacted

through voice and the vocal praise of voice. The report's assertion that "equal political voice" is a "*widely* cherished ideal" [emphasis added] suggests a citizenry that is eager to exercise its power of voice, "equally" and for the sake of even greater social equalities too. Yet the report's story about inequality presents a different image of the citizenry, wherein we the people are massively and unequally depoliticized, our privative silence cherished far more widely and variously than our public voice. By invoking voice while casually reducing it to an empty popular platitude, the public voice of the Task Force report itself falls into an anxious ventriloquism, one that uses a dummy citizenry to praise the value of voice in order to authorize an inquiry into voice's decline among that very same citizenry. The perverse performative result is a hollowing out of "voice," and voices, by way of a fantasized image of the citizenry invoked in bad empirical faith. The Task Force would have done better to simply speak in its own voice about voice, inviting whatever responses may come while doing the publicly contentious work of political critique, without hiding behind the ventriloquized authority of public opinion.

The report's conceptual and rhetorical hollowness around voice results in discordant empirical conclusions too. The second chapter of the report scrutinizes the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and the decline of political voice, where voice is understood to be synonymous with political participation generally.¹⁵² The report searches in vain for a systemic account of the relationships between these two kinds of inequality. The report concludes definitively that a "socioeconomic" bias runs through political participation in the United States – the better off tend to participate more and are listened to more by the government when they do participate, whether it be through voting, party activity, interest group representation, or even social movements, those

¹⁵² Jacobs and Skocpol ed., *Inequality and American Democracy*, 19.

disruptive, fugitive formations that are ostensibly “the weapons of the weak.”¹⁵³ Beyond this important if unsurprising conclusion, the report offers the mixed assessment that while inequalities of voice may or may not have gotten worse in recent decades, they have not on balance gotten any better. The Task Force does not, after its long survey of the research literatures, hazard an account of how socioeconomic inequality might be *exacerbating* inequalities of voice. The report finds no unambiguous evidence that this is happening, in fact, although it does not rule out the possibility. Finally, although the report argues that social movements are the likeliest vehicles for the expansion of political voice across class lines, it is skeptical that such formations can evade capture by interest group politics and the two parties, which tend to be dominated by elites.¹⁵⁴

Here the report’s survey of empirical literature on inequality and political voice fizzles out with vague findings and tepid critical analyses. One source of the report’s diagnostic ambivalence is its anodyne conception of voice. The report uses the phrase “political voice” as a pleasant sounding synonym for political participation of any and every sort. Besides identifying voice with political participation as such, the report’s already sweeping definition of voice at times goes much further to include virtually any information that is passed on from a person or a group to the government, actively or otherwise, including poll responses, market research, and actuarial data.

If social movements are the best bet for the broadening of political voice, the report’s conclusions do not give them much guidance. The report’s failure to find signal reinforcement effects between voicelessness and wealth stratification may well testify to the vitality of large republican *stasis*, but this does not in itself give social movements

¹⁵³ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

much sense of how to generate and sustain voice in an era where many forms of inequality are flourishing, linked or not. Neither does the report offer future researchers many clues as to what to look for in reckoning the ongoing trajectories of voicelessness. Future social movements and critics of democratic life in the United States could use a stronger prudential theory of the dynamics of voicelessness, one that is itself closer to a more compelling ethic of voice. Hannah Arendt and Lucretius, the phenomenological pluralist improbably mixed in here with the demotic materialist, can together help with all of this.

Large republican social movement critics interested in reassembling a theory of political voice could do worse than to start out with Arendt's own reading of James Madison's Federalist 10 in *On Revolution*. Arendt notes that Madison's conception of faction has an unmistakably "positive accent."¹⁵⁵ Faction is a creative force in democratic life because differences in human capacities for reason produce the generative power of what Arendt calls "many voices."¹⁵⁶ The word "voice" in fact does not occur in Federalist 10, but Arendt is right to point out the creative power of differences in "opinion," "passion," and "impulse" in Madison's theory.¹⁵⁷ Arendt does overlook the *ambivalence* of Madison's scheme toward voice, responsiveness, and their exercise by the many. Madison's few and far away representatives are by design frequently unresponsive to the many voices of their large constituencies, while the responsiveness of the many to one another is thwarted by their own numbers and the extent of the territory, muting small factions and rendering large ones senseless to their power. That said, Arendt's appreciation for the many voices of the factious large republic points to both her

¹⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (New York: Penguin 2006), 93.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁷ James Madison, "Federalist Paper 10," 122-123.

reading of the American founding's pluralism and her own distinctive understanding of voice, which is rooted in her own conceptions of natality, plurality, action, and power.

Arendt praises the leaders of the American Revolution for their refusal to invoke public opinion in support of their arguments, unlike the leaders of the French Revolution (and we might add, the Task Force), who did so regularly to add “force” to their ideas.¹⁵⁸ The authority that is claimed by appeals to public opinion, Arendt argues, is a tyrannical one because it collapses the very plurality that makes a public realm possible. No free exchange of different opinions need take place if all opinions are converging toward, or authorized by, some latent “unanimity.” The urge toward sameness that drives such ventriloquistic appeals makes public realms “superfluous” along with their peculiar mode of equality, causing both to “simply disappear.”¹⁵⁹ Arendt reads the American founding as honoring a certain kind of demotic pluralism, one that is inherent to the human condition, and which therefore transcends any given diversity of economic interests or quirk of constitutional design. Arendt thinks that democratic peoplehood for the founders was irreducibly and gloriously multiple. “The word ‘people’ retained for them [the founders] the meaning of manyness, of the endless variety of a multitude whose majesty resided in its very plurality.”¹⁶⁰

Arendt argues that the founders preserved the “distinctions” of plurality in large part by avoiding the “social question,” what she takes to be the properly “private” issue of “necessity” or economics and the related issues of class, labor, work, home, and property.¹⁶¹ Contemporary large republican social movement critics, reflecting on the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

enduring legacies of slavery, the colonization of indigenous peoples, and other “social” questions that the founders publicly deliberated over and legislated upon at length, and in sometimes fantastical detail, will rightly contest Arendt’s account here. They might point to the excruciatingly brutal and unreal social limits to plurality that were inscribed within and constituted by the Three-Fifths Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Act, among other repressive examples. They will want to think about the obsessive concern for commerce generally in the discourse of the founding too. They might also ask whether the emergentist mechanics of Madison’s imaginary are compatible with Arendt’s vision of the majestic multitude’s endless variety, and whether those powers that stem from the limits to human reason can be more powerfully imagined otherwise. In doing so, however, they still may find Arendt’s conception of the founding’s demotic vocal manyness to be worth appropriating and revising, even though it is not nearly demotic or vocal enough.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt develops her conception of plurality by way of a phenomenological reconstruction of human activity.¹⁶² Arendt’s phenomenology is expressly anthropocentric. She wants to understand the possibilities and limits of the human condition from the standpoint of human doings. Nature, including human nature, is a part of this perspective, but, contrary to Lucretius, it is a nature that is never known in itself apart from human perception, even though nature exists independently of human perception and structures human experiences of it externally.¹⁶³ The power of nature to shape human life unknowably as is sometimes referred to by Arendt as the earth, and the

¹⁶² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 7.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

modern “social” condition of politics is marked in part by its refusal to yield to this power.¹⁶⁴

Plurality for Arendt is the multiplication of human natality, where natality is the sheer given fact of having been born a distinct someone, distinct from everyone else who has ever lived or will live.¹⁶⁵ There is something both profoundly individualistic and profoundly impersonal about natality. My natality is not my “real inner self” but “who” I appear to be to others in an historical “web of human stories.”¹⁶⁶ In the course of my life my natality unfolds through my speech and deeds, what Arendt calls “action.” I have something to do with my speech and deeds, in the disclosure of my historical “who” in the world, but I will never determine completely “who” I turn out to be. My public appearance eludes my control, because of its relational involvements with language, wider historical forces, the earth, and other people’s perceptions and narratives, among many other things. Natality’s action multiplied many times over generates plurality’s power, a shared space for acting together with others as others that creates and sustains public realms.

Power as appearance needs spaces in which to appear.¹⁶⁷ Arendt has in mind here the territorializations of the Athenian polis, the agora in particular as well as the political and ethical distinctions that protect the private realm of the *oikos*. Publics for Arendt need to be of a certain scale, intensity, and duration. She uses the metaphor of light to explain these conditions for publicity. To live in public perpetually is to be blinded and lose oneself in the glare, while to live only in the private realm is live a subhuman, animal-

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 199.

like, un-individuated, shadowy life. To strike the right balance allows the public citizen to strive toward immortality, “the shining brightness we once called glory.”¹⁶⁸ Powerful public realms, then, are finely if precariously luminescent, following the logic of Arendt’s light metaphor. There is a force to natalities unfolded by the many in a space sustained by public memory and rhetoric. The precarity comes from the fact that power is, as Arendt says, “boundless and unpredictable.”¹⁶⁹ The aleatory force of natality’s self-disclosure is always at odds with the organized public realm’s borders, laws, and traditions. The same light waves that keep plurality cohesively public also tend to resist containment. They travel, unpredictably, in ways that are not under the control of their originary human actors. The many voices that characterize plurality and power for Arendt never quite stay put. They always have a creative and therefore disruptive relationship to historical time, in that they are the source of the generational novelty that makes historical memory prospectively meaningful.

Power can also be lost entirely, a turn of events that Arendt likens to political death.

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and where deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.¹⁷⁰

The death of the body politic, which can only occur by way of the powerlessness of politics itself, is Arendt’s main concern in the above quote. Arendt distinguishes power from domination, strength, rationality, propaganda, and violence. Located within the open and common world of human speech and action, power reveals its ethical and

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 201.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 200.

political limits when it is overcome by deception, empty words, destruction, and “brutality.” Rooted in the human conditions of natality and plurality, and constituted by the gathered actions of many in a public space of appearance, power exists only in its actualization through speech and deed. Like action, power depends upon the public self-disclosure of actors in historical time. Actors acting together *with* other actors generate power. Yet because we do not know “who” we disclose ourselves to be in the course of collective action, or what the effects of our actions will turn out to mean in the web of human stories, power itself is always “boundless and unpredictable,” which in part explains its peculiar force. Given its boundlessness and unpredictability, power cannot be stored up for emergencies, like weapons or food and water, nor kept in place through fixed territories, as with national sovereignty. Power therefore co-exists only uneasily with *machpolitik*. Power can overcome violence and strength through the gathered voices and acts of the many; it can also be destroyed (but not replaced) through the dispersal of the many and the dissolution of the space of appearance.¹⁷¹ In-between gathering and dispersal, power is preserved through what Arendt calls “organization,” the laws, traditions, habits, and institutions that sustain the space of appearance during those interims when actors disperse temporarily and withdraw back into the private realm, only to reappear later.¹⁷²

For Arendt, the loss of power is the loss of our capacity to act with others in a way that generates, sustains, and discloses a common world. Powerlessness is marked by the receding of public spaces.¹⁷³ This may occur, for example, through the gentle decline of a formally constituted public realm into the technocratic shadows of the social, or

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 202.

¹⁷² Ibid., 203.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 204.

through the brutal sovereign repression of spontaneously emergent spaces of appearance. In both cases, our ethical and political incapacities to act together, and the philosophical inability to recognize power when we see it, are at the root of modern political powerlessness. Power-seekers, on Arendt's view, would be well advised to cultivate a deeper political appreciation for both the immaterial force and fragility of human natality, plurality, and public space, which will be lost when power is mistaken for its rivals, like reason, strength, violence, or sovereignty.

On Arendt's reading, the geopolitics of the twentieth century is full of such mistakes. She reads contemporary politics as dominated by "the social," an inversion of the public and private realms that seeks to replace plurality with conformity, action with behavior, and power with administration, commerce, and violence.¹⁷⁴ The social cannot, given the plural fact of the human condition, eradicate natality entirely. But it can try. The radical hostility toward human plurality as such is an anxious, bad faith commitment to violence that characterizes modern governmental power. Totalitarianism is its half-formed, short-lived child.

In the concluding chapter to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argues that totalitarianism must be understood as a new "form of government" in its own right, rather than as a transitory or haphazard series of external catastrophes afflicting classical forms like democracy or monarchy.¹⁷⁵ Essentially different from the extralegal form of tyranny as well, totalitarianism's emergence marks a terrifying new horizon for human political experience, one that will surely survive the passing of Hitler and Stalin. Arendt's point is that the totalitarian form is still with us because the all too protean

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 460-461.

origins of totalitarianism are still with us: loneliness as the normal register of social life, the frenzied lawfulness of ideological certitude, mass poverty and mass homelessness, the routine use of terror as a political instrument, and the ever growing speeds and scales of media, economics, and warfare.

The *sand storm* is Arendt's metaphor for this volatile and shifting space that throws together the totalitarian form, the enduring civilizational crises that produced it, and the public realms that are precariously pitched against it.¹⁷⁶ The ambiguities and subtleties of Arendt's striking metaphor are worth pausing over. Her image of the sand storm can tell us a lot about the nature and environs of the totalitarian form - and the kinds of politics that might withstand it.

Although Arendt argues that totalitarianism will most certainly recur after Hitler and Stalin, she insists that this new form is too self-destructive to last for very long in any given time and place. Totalitarianism's suicidal rage for conquest and violence renders it unable to secure anything like a permanent world order. (She notes in the second edition's 1966 preface that it has undoubtedly thawed into tyranny in the Soviet Union.)¹⁷⁷ Critics and admirers of Arendt's theory alike often overlook both the fast burn of totalitarianism's death-drive and the wider geopolitical amorphousness that ignites it. Totalitarianisms emerge for a time, then disappear suddenly, only to have some of their elements migrate, shape-shift, and re-emerge elsewhere, accomplishing fantastical destruction in the course of their coming-to-be and passing-away. There is, then, paradoxically, a kind of fluidity, turbulence, and even formlessness that attends this new political form, a void, which is partly what Arendt's sand storm metaphor tries to convey.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 478.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., xxxvii.

What in the world could cause the desert of tyranny to be thrown into the air and perambulate the earth? One might guess that the cause is something like absolute lawlessness. And, indeed, the extraordinary criminality of totalitarianism makes it tempting to think of it as a mere modern tyranny, but Arendt's desert-in-motion metaphor argues against this commonplace. She likens tyranny to a desert because it is a political space that is evacuated of laws, institutions, and traditions. What remains under tyranny, however, is the open space of plurality, where human beings can still confront one another within a cohering field of action and power. Totalitarianism radically eliminates the space of plurality through the mobilizations of mass terror, collapsing the spaces between us that make us human.¹⁷⁸ Such mobilizations are not simply lawless. Although contemptuous of positive law, totalitarianism is lawfully obedient to its own images of Nature and History. More than this, the totalitarian form seeks to *embody* the laws of Nature and History. Because it imagines that these laws can be directly enacted by politics, the totalitarian movement tries vainly to form their more-than-human movements.¹⁷⁹ Ideology helps to put the desert into motion too, but again not mainly through the lawlessness of unreason. Rather, Arendt argues that totalitarian ideology is distinguished by its logical lawfulness. Totalitarian logicity at once divorces thought from worldly common sense and attaches it to arbitrary and fleeting first principles.¹⁸⁰ The resulting conclusions are half-believed, inchoate certitudes that cling feverishly to a tight deductive form. Thanks to this *a priori* sandblasting of common sense, the desert of tyranny is no longer a setting for the creative solace of solitude, exile, or contemplation.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 466.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 461-462.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 466.

It can only become the whirlwind of ideological reason in concert with the supra-human laws of everyday terror.

The most important force that throws the desert into motion is loneliness, which Arendt distinguishes from isolation.¹⁸¹ Isolation, the old game of divide and conquer, belongs to the desert of tyranny. Isolated women and men lack an organized public realm in which to create freedom with others. Yet they nonetheless retain a private realm that roots them in the world through home, family, work, and labor. To be lonely is to be deprived of both the public and the private realms and therefore to feel utterly abandoned by other human beings, to finally lose one's place in the world completely. The mass production of loneliness is closely linked to the experiences of "uprootedness" and "superfluousness" that have unevenly afflicted peoples across the earth since the industrial revolution and European imperialism. Pervasive loneliness as a modern way of life therefore amorphously anticipates the emergence of the totalitarian form, but it also serves to structure and vivify its psychic violence once underway. Loneliness perversely tends to intensify when felt in the presence of others, that is, when one is not strictly speaking alone.¹⁸² The genius of mass terror is that it is able to sustain precisely this kind of loneliness among many millions of people together simultaneously. This is in part, Arendt argues, because totalitarian ideology seems to promise an *escape* from loneliness, that is, to offer form to what was before felt as superfluous and uprooted. It is also because there is something in the psychology of loneliness that makes it singularly

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 476.

¹⁸² Ibid., 475.

susceptible to the ideological calculus of despair and fatalism, to “deducing [...] always the worst possible conclusions,” as Arendt puts it.¹⁸³

Arendt herself does not pursue the worst possible conclusions in the final chapter to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She does, however, entertain the dark possibility that the “true predicaments” of our times have yet “to assume their authentic form,” a form that she does not expect to be totalitarian.¹⁸⁴ Given her sand storm metaphor, this remark might be understood as a double warning about the emergence of still newer political forms and the persistent dangers of political formlessness. While it may be difficult to imagine worse forms than totalitarianism, Arendt’s story is also about the generative origins of totalitarianism. She concludes her book by arguing that these origins are still very much in the wind. The protean creativity of these airborne elements makes political life a much more precarious and circumscribed affair than it might otherwise appear, especially in the wake of Nazi defeat and Stalinism’s thaw. That said, there exist other protean forces that are more congenial to the power of the public realm. Against the sand storm, Arendt wagers on the formless forces of natality. The stubborn facts of natality do not yield reliably to loneliness or ideology or terror precisely because of their radical novelty, their inevitable disruptions of whatever preceded them, but also because of their inherent worldliness. Natality’s stubborn facts will always push - sometimes weakly, sometimes irresistibly - toward for plurality, action, power, and the public realm. It is for this reason, if for no other, that totalitarianism’s origins will never be the only origins given to us.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ibid., 478.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 460.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 479.

Reading Arendt on the swerves of action, power, the social's sand storm, and ideological fear, the demotic materialist recognizes a political ally across an ontological divide. Arendt's anthropocentrism is one element of this divide. Arendt also distinguishes "the world" from "the earth," where worlds are exclusively human domains of self-disclosure. The demotic materialist, in affirming the vital continuities between human beings, non-human life, and inorganic matter, would decline this distinction. But she might make common cause with Arendt's commitment to natality (understood as a swerve), the public space of appearance (understood as flowing simulacra raining through the void), and the proto-totalitarian sand storm (understood as the Religious Fear of Death.)

For Arendt, human beginnings, the phenomenological force inherent in human births, mark a break with nature. Here nature is understood to be always cyclical and for that reason incapable of creativity or ethical individuation. The demotic materialist by contrast would argue that human individuality is located within the creativities of nature itself. Human natalities are plural for the demotic materialist too, but hold no monopoly on political plurality as such. Keeping human natality within a broader orbit of earthly swerves would require closer contacts too between plurality and what Arendt calls alterity, that mysterious otherness that is possessed by all individual objects as distinct things in the universe.¹⁸⁶

If human appearances are always the appearances of things, where the appearances *as* appearances are things too, then the Arendtian conception of power needs a physicalist account of how actors and their appearance might be distinguished. Lucretius' notion of simulacra might be one way to do this. Lucretius argues that all

¹⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

perception is made possible by the material skins of bodies peeling off, maintaining roughly their original shape, and floating until colliding with human sense organs, leaving a more or less faithful imprint of their original shape.¹⁸⁷ The simulacra tend lose their shape a bit as they fly through the void. The faraway tower loses its corners in its flight to the eye. This is because void has seduced a few atoms to trail off en route. Lucretius' account of perception is fanciful, and deeply inadequate, but it has the virtue underscoring the physicality and spatiality of sense-data, and the tendency of such stuff to change over distances.¹⁸⁸ Consider the Arendtian actor, aiming at the brightness of glory and the subtle words and deeds that characterize power. If successful, she owes her self-disclosure in public space not to a conceit of human psychology but to a certain kind of flow of light and sound waves bouncing off of her body and connecting to the eyes, ears, and skin of others.

Arendt argues that power depends upon words that are not empty, deeds that are not brutal, a public field in which words and deeds are still close enough to disclose realities. The demotic materialist would affirm this definition of power and reinterpret it molecularly. Simulacra flows of only *certain* arrangements, intensities, and scales generate political power.¹⁸⁹ The sounds cannot be too loud, nor the images too small or large. The flows and voids have to be just so, even if what counts as "just so" will itself depend upon time and place. The simulacra field might be refined into a power generating one through Epicurean receptiveness, Democritean egalitarian militancy, or Lucretius' civic love poetry. Like Arendt, the materialist knows the value too of quiet contemplation in rendering political voices more audible amidst civil war, the violence of

¹⁸⁷ Lucretius, *The Way of Things*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, 90-97.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

empire, non-human caused catastrophes like the Athenian plague, and the frantic death dance of Religious Fear. Demotic ataraxy is a way of things that would ask us “to think about what we are doing,” as Arendt says.¹⁹⁰

Arendt’s horrific image of the sand storm resonates with demotic ataraxy too, with its mix of loneliness, ideological certitude, and despair toward the earth/world. Lucretius is afraid of these things too. The Roman Social War troubles his mind. His name for this collection of elements is Religious Fear, following Democritus. The totalitarian swerve for Lucretius comes in the form of the Athenian plague. Lucretius shares Arendt’s hope that a kind of demotic power might be the antidote to death terror, a power that depends upon an ordinary felt sense for others as public beings. For Arendt, the social’s war on plurality’s many voices is dangerous not because it might succeed but because of the violence that it inevitably and paradoxically produces in attempting to reduce mortality by canceling natality. Totalitarian Religious Fear, including its bizarre pursuit of death for its own sake, is the perverse product of this unearthly bad faith.

The Arendt/Lucretius theory of political voice accents the creative force of action and power, rooted in a deep ontological condition of plurality, one that can be refined and shared more or less finely with other public beings. Human vocal chords play a significant role in this theory of voice, but so do other modes of language use, alongside human and nonhuman forms flowing unpredictably in the right kind of space. Responsiveness to new simulacra and the bodies from which they originate is crucial to sustaining power. This image of voice is suspicious of administration without disputing the need for it, or for representative authority, or public welfare. It combines a respect for several kinds of equality at once: equality before the law, equalities within and between

¹⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

species, and the agonistic equality of self-disclosure in a public realm. It is therefore vigilant against social encroachments upon demotic manyness, especially toward authoritative appeals based on public opinion surveys, for this is trained behavior masquerading as pluralist action. This conception of voice is mindful of the need for greater responsiveness to the inherent territorial ambivalence of demotic power too.

For an example of how this conception of political voice might inform contemporary inequalities of voice in the United States, especially its territorial ambivalence, I would like to turn to Anne Norton's account of "the Muslim Question" and human dog-politics in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal.¹⁹¹

Norton uses the idea of the "the Muslim Question" that has emerged in the United States and elsewhere in the West after 9/11 as an occasion to critically interrogate the limits of democratic pluralism in the present day. Like "the Jewish question" of nineteenth century Europe that attracted Marx's attention, Norton's Muslim Question is not primarily a question that Norton would ask of Muslims, but is rather a vicious projection of non-Muslim fears and tyrannies onto Muslims that she thinks demands more critical reflexivity.¹⁹² When non-Muslims demand of Muslims fresh assurances that they too widely cherish equal political voice and can be trusted as citizens, a kind of preemptive circumvention of voice assumes the guise of democratic responsiveness to voice. The question that non-Muslim citizens in the US and elsewhere should be asking, Norton argues, is whether liberal pluralism is capable of sustaining its own practices of solidarity, secularism, and dialogical responsiveness in everyday life. The Muslim

¹⁹¹ Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question*, 1.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Question is a model instance of the Arendtian conception of powerlessness, premised upon empty words, brutal deeds, veiled intentions, ideological certitude, and death fear.

Echoing the elemental imagery of Arendt's sand storm, Norton's Muslim Question is set in what she calls "the American desert," a conceptual space that combines popular US imaginations of the Middle East, the erosion of US democratic traditions, and the expansive geographies of the American military empire.¹⁹³ Norton's American desert stretches from the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib to the interrogation cells of Guantanamo Bay to the sexual oppression of US women "at home" and "abroad" to the rise of mass incarceration, also "at home" (191). Norton argues that critical attention to the Muslim Question demands a kind of political voice that can sustain responsiveness to inequalities throughout these locations and think about the connections between them.

Norton's account of power in the Abu Ghraib scandal gives prominent place to female soldiers and weaponized dogs. Norton uses the example of Lyndie England's roles in the torture photographs to argue that the Muslim Question gains its force from a kind of false feminism. In order to prove the sexism of Islam in the flesh of the detainees, and to hail the feminist superiority of the US, the military weaponizes the gendered bodies of female soldiers like England, sexually exploiting the female torturers themselves along with their male and female victims. Powerlessness is therefore expanded significantly into the ranks of the torturers themselves, in what purports to be a righteous scene of liberal feminist revenge upon fundamentalist misogyny.¹⁹⁴ The Muslim Question here is also a feminist one, because the feminist false flag operation could have been exposed and resisted, Norton argues, by a more militant authentic

¹⁹³ Ibid., 176.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 179.

feminism, one connected to the lived practices of liberal pluralism and secularism. The inversions and projections of the Muslim Question, then, both demand a rigorous scrutiny of Religious Fear and other violent modes of political fantasy, but also a closer attention to the bodily situations of ordinary people, especially women. The pseudo-feminist assaults upon the detainees, and the women who tortured them, occurred in part because of a failure to mind the distinction between power and violence and the link between powerlessness and a certain crudity of language and affect that afflicts the bodies of US women “normally.” For feminist power as power to counter these assaults, a certain respect for otherness and attention of the micropolitics of gender and sex would have to be publicly produced in a scene of routine violence. Critical attention to the rain of sounds and images in Abu Ghraib, both the cries of the detainees and the genres of pornography acted out in the torture photographs, is vital to the work of democratic response here.

Although Norton makes a similar claim about the military’s weaponization of dogs, she leaves out the nonhuman side of the necessary critical response.¹⁹⁵ Dogs were used in Abu Ghraib to “fear up” prisoners, reducing them to a subhuman dog-like state by forcing them to submit to the threats of barking dogs, all the while exploiting a supposedly Muslim-specific fear of dogs that Norton takes to be a commonly human one. Norton then uses the militarized dog as a kind of index to the histories of American empire, linking canine weapons to the Conquistadors, plantation owners, present day mass incarceration, among others.¹⁹⁶ She makes the same point about torturers who are dog handlers that she makes about Lyndie England, that the master of the weaponized

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 190.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 191.

dog loses his humanity alongside his victim, becoming beast-like in his use of the beast. Dog violence too is part of the demotic orbit of the Muslim Question, an ordinary body that becomes a vital if unrecognized part of human violence.

Should the nonhuman voices of the dogs matter in themselves to Norton's story? Is there any reason to imagine that attention to the canine part of human-dog violence is worth public attention, as opposed to the technological instrumentalization of dogs by humans as weapons or the ways in which dogs serve as mute vehicles for human cultural fears? Is there anything important about the bodies of dogs, their training, their individual bark, their musculature, their species-specific powers, their well-being, that can illuminate the Muslim Question or the geographies of US Empire through which they circulate? Norton gives no particular reason to think so. Dogs for Norton do not play a role in the American desert apart from their being masterfully deployed or encoded by human intentions, desires, and fears. The dogs themselves are blameless in the American desert, but they also not particularly important as actors in their own right. Yet the very abundance of dogs in US imperial projects suggests that their own specific actions and powers, as natalities/actions and pluralities/powers rather than only violences, might be worth more public scrutiny and engagement.

Large republican social movement critics might consider, for example, the "Puppies Behind Bars Program," a non-profit organization that participates in a dog-loving social movement amongst incarcerated people in the United States.¹⁹⁷ The nonprofit supplies Labrador retrievers to prison administrators, who then give them to prisoners to care for and train. Once trained, the dogs are then given to wounded veterans

¹⁹⁷ Paul Solberg and Christopher Makos, *Puppies Behind Bars: Training Puppies to Change Lives*, (New York: Glitterati Incorporated 2007).

as support animals. The program's rhetoric is often insipid, infantilizing of dogs, prisoners, and veterans alike. It participates in a shaming discourse of rehabilitation in an era of mass incarceration. It also instrumentalizes the dogs severely, and in fact imprisons them during the many months of their training. Yet the non-profit program is not able to control all of the effects, meanings, attachments, and powers that result from giving dogs to prisoners. The individual relationships between imprisoned caretakers and individual dogs generate something very much like the mix of Arendtian power and demotic ataraxy that I have tried to construct here. It also produces what Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* has called "significant otherness," the power of inter-species relationships to produce love precisely through the negotiation of alterity as alterity, the persistent strangeness of human-nonhuman encounters.¹⁹⁸ Dogs train prisoners and prisoners train dogs, just as the program's rehabilitative rhetoric prescribes, but these trainings across the species divide radically exceed the program's mandate of restoring civic virtue through public shame and repentance. The animals are adored, to a degree wildly out of proportion to their caretakers' instrumental concerns for their own legal rehabilitation or the appearance of rehabilitation. The dogs also produce demotic effects in the yard, as people gather to pet or play with the dog, negotiate with the caretakers as to whether the dog can be petted, ask about the dog's name, cooing and fussing publicly, visibly over it. New refinements of feelings, language, and relationships among people, including corrections officers, are produced almost instantaneously yet unpredictably by the presence of the dog. The simulacra of public appearances here

¹⁹⁸ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003) 50.

become radically more generative of plural power. They also help to fight off the sand storm's elements of unearthly, unworldly despair and, crucially, loneliness.

Prison dogs have voice in the Arendtian and Lucretian sense of pluralist power. The dogs self-disclose as individuals in a fugitive repressive space of appearance, according to their distinctive personalities. Some dogs do not have what it takes to the do the time and so are shipped out, much as prisoners are transferred or soldiers are discharged. Those that stick around unfold a "who" in a queer and turbulent public realm, one modified but not wholly determined by the dog's training by humans and the dog's training of humans. The dog's inner personality is somewhere in the mix here, but the dog's power goes beyond its personality to enmesh its relational otherness with many other voices, producing swerves and rearranging voids along the way. The program, the dogs, the social movements of dogs, prisoners, corrections officers, and veterans inside and outside of prisons that have emerged in concert with the program, also index those geographies of US empire in much the same way as Norton's weaponized dogs. The program, quite inadvertently in opposition to its own insipid jingoism, produces very public memories of how many prisoners go into the military and how many veterans are incarcerated, and how lonely many of them are.

This too is a possible critical and activist response to Norton's Muslim Question. The contrast between the "puppies behind bars" and the weaponized canines at Abu Ghraib serves as a nonhuman instance of the distinction between power and violence. It suggests that not only the powerlessness of women soldiers in Abu Ghraib was instrumental to the implementation of torture, but that the powerlessness of the *dogs as*

dogs also played a part, this quite apart from the women's complicity in the practice of torture or the ferocity of the animals on both sides of the leash.

This chapter has attempted to think about the problem of unequal voice, using Arendtian plurality and Lucretian demotic ataraxy. The question of voice is fundamental to the pursuit of democratic equality, and yet it is poorly understood. This chapter has tried to contribute to a better conception of voice by pursuing the Arendtian conceptions of power and plurality and pushing them into a different ontology, where voices are as much a part of the physical world as city streets. This chapter has also tried to make use of the distinctively Arendtian conceptions of voicelessness via the social and the totalitarian tendencies of contemporary liberal sovereignty. Voice, on both Arendt's and Lucretius' conceptions, has an ambivalent relationship toward territoriality. This chapter's use of the human-dog politics also leaves open the possibility of nonorganic voice, what Jane Bennett calls "thing power" and Bruno Latour calls "actants."¹⁹⁹ The "public realm as simulacrum flows" formulation that was briefly introduced here may help thing power theorists to think more about the problem of public-making and what distinguishes *thing power* from *thing forces* more generally.

¹⁹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2010) 34. Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004) 70-87.

Conclusion: Closing Reflections on Demotic Ataraxy

This dissertation has tried to think seriously with and about several political and theoretical traditions all while keeping a central problem in view, the rise of socioeconomic inequality in the United States and the kinds of politics that might attenuate and resist it: liberal pluralism, Marxism, ancient Athenian democracy, ancient atomism, and Arendtian political theory. The wager of this project has been that a great deal can be learned by “reading” what Lucretius might have called the ABCs of these theories, closely, faithfully, and in combination with others. I have therefore avoided analytic summaries in favor of close readings deliberately, if perhaps to a fault. My hope has been that slow attention to the very fine grain of the texts might draw their ontologies and political arguments closer together, enabling them to make contact with one another. If the reader gets lost sometimes in exegeses, unable to see the forest for the trees, that it is in part because I thought the tree bark was very much worth pausing over, thinking about, reading, and comparing to other surfaces. All of these surfaces have involved the relationship between democracy and capitalism in some way.

The project took the 2005 APSA Task Force report as an occasion to interrogate this relationship, taking the public imagination of a certain mainstream current within American political science as an object of critique. The Task Force takes capitalism to a deep, stable, background condition of American politics as well as a bedrock tenet of the American Creed. As an inevitable feature of modern American life, capitalism as such is left unexamined and uncontested in the report’s otherwise searching inquiry into the dynamics of socioeconomic stratification. This project has tried to throw more of

capitalism's depths and surfaces into political visibility. Marx's critique of capital is helpful here, especially when viewed synoptically through the lenses of value critique and aleatory materialism. This dissertation is the first work to my knowledge that has attempted to re-read Marx's value theory using both frameworks simultaneously. The result is a new image of abstract time and relative surplus value production, one that accent and theorizes the materialities and the voids of the value-form. In the spirit of Marx's response to the Gotha Program, this reworking of his critique counsels a prudential attitude toward capital in the absence of socialist alternatives. Capitalist equivalences of work, time, and wealth should be negotiated and resisted carefully rather than affirmed as modern liberal common sense. This reworking of Marx's value theory opens up new spaces in Marxist class theory too, where inter-proletarian demotic spaces emerge and persist non-teleologically. There are many difficulties with this position, among them the question of how to grasp capitalist alienation's extraordinary, and often veiled, powers while also keeping critical attention focused on its "open," its "spaces," those modes of capital's becoming that are never entirely "formed" - for example, the elastic temporality of the working day under relative surplus value production.

The Task Force, even as it worries over socioeconomic stratification, still clings to a liberal conception of civil society, one constituted legitimately by as-if equals getting by in an imperfect meritocracy. The Task Force's legitimism was one of the things that burned and bothered and pushed this project, even if the author remains undecided about the question. Marx and Arendt in different ways tend to have a better sense for democracy's situation within a larger and more precarious socio-historical dynamic (one incidentally much more complex than the orthodox Marxist conception of base and

superstructure or the caricatures of Arendt as nostalgic classicist.) This view of democracy as conjoined and precariously inter-involved with a broader “social” (capitalism for Marx, the social for Arendt) resonates with the Democritean and Lucretian images of the polis, where the materialities of cities often menace ethical life, where the energies, frictions, and violences of cities reward a cool contemplation and cautious public intervention. This kind of ataraxy does not by itself say enough about how to realize equality and justice by way of democratic projects, but it has the virtue of keeping democracy off an anxious and dangerously unreal pedestal.

This project’s reading of the atomist’s political theories, fine grained or not, in many respects runs against the grain of much conventional scholarship. James Warren and A.A. Long, for example, argue that the atomists’ conception of ataraxy was by its essential conception politically indifferent.²⁰⁰ The tranquility of materialist contemplation on this reading was a product of the philosopher’s *withdrawal* from politics, rather than a vital element of political engagement. There is textual evidence for and against this view, as chapter two makes clear. Future work on ataraxy will want to attend closely to the explicit and implicit political arguments made Lucretius, Epicurus, and Democritus, especially their conception of political “conventions” and how these stem from their account of nature’s swerves and voids and human beings’ precarious place within them. This project focuses on those moments, but in doing so pays too little attention to the atomists’ ethical and epistemological psychology, elements of which were shared more broadly with Skepticism and Stoicism, following Pyrrho. Future scholarship on ataraxia

²⁰⁰ See James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics*, 35-43. See also AA Long and D.N. Sedley *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 201-209.

traditions, demotic or otherwise, will want to remedy this project's limitations on these issues, especially the deep links between ethics and epistemology that characterize these traditions. I have in this dissertation tried to remain faithful to a certain reading of atomism, especially of Lucretius, without denying the contestability of it. This contestability is made more acute by the fact that I am trained as a specialist in contemporary political theory, and not as a specialist in Hellenistic philosophy. In the course of completing this dissertation I have more than once been made anxiously aware of the limitations of my knowledge on these and related issues.

There are other thinkers whose work on Lucretius, Epicurus, and Democritus was fundamental to my education on this figures and who deserved more critical attention in this project than they got. I mention them not only in a spirit of forgetful acknowledgement but as places where future scholarship might still profitably pick up. Cynthia Farrar's *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* helped me to understand the connections between the laughing philosopher's physics and ethics.²⁰¹ Michel Serres' *The Birth of Physics* was major source of intellectual inspiration for this project and deserved to be more prominently discussed and incorporated.²⁰² My advisor, Jane Bennett, published major contributions to the materialist tradition of political thought while I was trying to figure out my own approach to these questions. Her book *Vibrant Matter* pushed me to think harder about the question of agency, voice, and thing power, especially in chapter three, but it is a debt that is not sufficiently evident in the text.²⁰³ If there is to be anything like ataraxy as a mood or a hope or mode of lived political attachment in the twenty first century, Bennett's approach to things and nonhuman

²⁰¹ Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Ancient Athens*.

²⁰² Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*.

²⁰³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

agency, one that tries to affect a sensibility toward precisely those things that resist human knowing, will have contributed enormously to it. My second reader, William Connolly, has also published prodigiously on the politics of nature and the faiths that attend them during the course of this project's gestation.²⁰⁴ Connolly's approach to nontheistic faith as a necessary element for deep democratic pluralism was another influence of this project that future work on ataraxy as a political theory will have to reckon with. The movement toward post-secularism in political theory in general has rich possibilities for the future of this theistically idiosyncratic line of thought.

In the wake of 9/11 and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, when this project was being written, there was an upsurge of renewed interest in the politics of cosmopolitanism, an idea with roots in other parts of Hellenistic political thought. Cosmopolitanism, the idea that one has political attachments to the world as a whole by virtue of being human, has close affinities to atomism but is not quite in contact with it. What fascinated me in particular about Lucretius was the poet's close involvement with his city, his attachment to the Roman line, the fact that he was, in other words, local, if subversively so. Yet there is a subversive strand within cosmopolitan thought too, one that stands closer to Diogenes than to Kant, and future work on demotic local materialism will want to think more about the place of cosmopolitan thinking in the contexts of post-colonial, transnational, critical race theory. Ifeoma Nwankwo's *Black Cosmopolitanism*

²⁰⁴ See William E. Connolly *Capitalism and Christianity. American Style*. See also William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.)

in particular stands out as a kind of counter-conventional image of political life that would-be neo-Lucretians might recognize as close to their own.²⁰⁵

This project also concerned itself with the defining legacy of James Madison's political thought, the large republic. This focus on Madison's Federalist 10 is another instance of this project wagering hopefully on a productive confusion between close readings of political texts and close attention to the political world. I do not, of course, know whether or to what degree the United States owes its modes of existence to the assumptions that Madison made about territoriality, space, human nature, and private property. I do think that the assumptions are worth critically entertaining for their own sake and for reasons of disciplinary conventions peculiar to American Political Science. The inversion of Madisonianism that the introduction recommends is a response to a certain line of thought in American politics, exemplified again by the Task Force authors, to take Madison's federalism to be a common sense "solution" to the problems of ancient democracies and republics. Madison's federalism is a subtle and provocative improvisation of political thought and I learned a great deal in trying to push his theory into a position where it might make contact with Lucretius. The way I tried to do this was by way of the ancient Greek ideal of *homonoia*, which shows up prominently in Democritus. Epicurus and Lucretius offer a conception of harmony that, right or wrong, is neither illiberal nor naïve, but premised upon an abiding commitment to publicly sensuous common sense. (The charge of illiberalism, although perhaps not naïvete, is almost certainly deserved in Democritus' case.) This project in any event needed to say

²⁰⁵ Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2014.)

more about harmony as like-mindedness, and how poetry, ataraxy, and materialist political conventions might produce it.

Another unfulfilled promise of this project was a more direct engagement with the politics of climate change. Nature, matter, and void as refigured poetical or philosophical constructs, or even forces in their own right, loomed large in these reflections but these need to be brought into closer contact with the emerging empirical sensibilities and research into the question of climate politics. Again William Connolly's recent work stands out in this regard in political theory. The ataraxy tradition that I tried to explore and revivify here has a lot to offer these emerging Green publics, but this project never got around to saying how in sufficient detail. The Marxist value-form and its voids will be a part of this story. So will the question of nonhuman political voice. But my hope in this project has been that ataraxy specifically can help us to think about new political conventions in a shifting, imperiled range of ecologies.

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Curriculum Vitae

William Dixon was born in Passaic, New Jersey in 1971. He attended the University of Chicago as an undergraduate. He received his undergraduate degree from the State University of New York at Albany in 2003, where he majored in political science. He began his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University in the fall of that year. In 2010 he began a doctoral fellowship at Bard College, under the auspices of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and the Humanities. During that time he began teaching at the Bard College Prison Initiative. He spent the 2011-12 academic year teaching in the Department of Politics at Oberlin College. In 2012 he returned to Bard College as an Academic Fellow for Political Studies at the Bard College Prison Initiative, where he continues to write and think about politics, political theory, writing, democracy, and philosophy.